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Thorne Douglas

Author of KILLRAINE

NIGHT RIDERS

A RANCHO BRAVO NOVEL

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CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Fawcett, London.

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First published 1975 by Fawcett Publications Inc., New York

Coronet edition 1979

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Printed in Great Britain for Hodder Fawcett Ltd., Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent (Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London, WC1 3DP) by C. Nicholls & Company Ltd
The Philips Park Press, Manchester

ISBN 0 340 21982 3

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NIGHT RIDERS

Chapter One

THE COMANCHES came at noon.

One moment, the West Texas uplands were empty, the vast dun prairie shimmering in the midday heat. The next, a blazing spot of color spilled over the horizon, coming fast. Even as the guard posted on the canyon wall sang out, Lucius Calhoon saw the Indians, dropped the book he was leafing through—for it was Sunday, a day of rest for Rancho Bravo—and grabbed his Henry rifle, never out of reach. Coming off the split-log bench before the big, stone house, he yelled: "Elias!"

Whitton, working with a colt in the corral, was already slipping through the bars, rifle in hand. Shading his eyes against the glare, he stared at that swirling spatter of color, now resolving itself into individual horsemen. "Comanch', all right," he said. "About forty of 'em, and that's Quanah in the lead; I know that roan warhorse of his. Tell the men to stand fast, Loosh. Nobody better make a wrong move. You and me know why they're comin', and Quanah ain't gonna be happy when he hears what we got to say."

Elias Whitton was a Negro, a stocky bull of a man with skin the color of melted tar, wide shoulders, thick chest, narrow hips, and bowed legs clad in the leather range clothes of a Texas brushpopper. He was, Calhoon knew, possessed of as much level-headed common sense and cold courage as any man Loosh had ever met; and the concern in his voice did nothing to diminish the chill that ran down Calhoon's spine as the red wave of horsemen

rushed toward them, breaking up, rejoining, forming line—the wild, yet precise maneuvering of what was, maybe, the best light cavalry in the world.

"I'll see to the men and hold 'em down," Calhoon said.

"Okay. I'll ride out to meet 'em." Elias opened the corral bars, caught the young horse, and, gathering its hackamore rein, swung up. Under his deft hand, the horse went willingly. Putting it into a lope, Elias rode more gracefully bareback than most men could have with a saddle. Calhoon watched him go, knowing that the survival of Rancho Bravo and every man on it was in Elias Whitton's hands.

Calhoon turned. The headquarters of their new ranch was in the mouth of a wide canyon, where a big spring welled year round, cold and fresh, from rock. The overflow nourished a grove of giant old cottonwoods. Shade, cool water—the two scarcest things on the high West Texas plains: it was an oasis and a sanctuary. Here they had constructed, so far, several corrals and one big building. Designed as a fort, it was long and low, walls of stone laid in adobe and slotted with loopholes and firing ports, windows shielded by heavy split-log shutters. The building enclosed the spring itself, insuring water for the longest siege, and its roof was made of flat slabs of stone on hard cedar poles, sod over that, its turf watered every other day to keep it green and nearly fireproof. The house had been built to last a hundred years. But, Calhoon thought, if Gannon and Killraine and the wagons from Colorado didn't get here soon, they'd be lucky to last another hundred hours.

Having heard the warning of the guard, the Rancho Bravo men, a dozen of them, were turning out. Some emerged from the Comanche tepees Elias had purchased from the tribe to house them until a bunkhouse could be built; others came from the creek where they'd been swimming and washing clothes. Each was fully armed; beyond the Pecos River in 1866, a man's guns went with him everywhere.

Calhoon, a tall man in his late twenties, with a bearing of command, faced them as they assembled. He wore

range clothes, but his broad-brimmed gray hat was that of a captain in Hampton's Confederate cavalry. His rifle was in his left hand; he had no right one. It had been lost to torture in a Northern prison camp, after he'd been captured at Gettysburg, and where it should have been, the wrist ended in a stump bound with heavy leather.

"All right," he said, careful to let no fear creep into his voice. "Indians comin' in, a lot of 'em. But they've been here before and we've had no trouble. They're getting used to us and us to them, and we'll keep it that way. This is, after all, their land, and we're here by their permission and under their protection. As long as we have their goodwill, we're safe. The minute we lose it, they can wipe us out. So there'll be no trouble from anybody in this outfit, you all understand? You keep your heads up, your eyes open, and your mouths shut while they're around. And if any of them start anything, just walk away from it and tell me or Elias Whitton."

The leathery Texans, Confederate veterans all, made sounds of assent, but grudgingly. They and Comanches were, after all, natural enemies like cats and dogs; it had been that way ever since there was a Texas. Yet Calhoon knew them all, knew he could count on them, trust them. And as for that exception—

A nasal voice rang out. "Hell, Calhoon. You mean if one of them red niggers tries to shove me around, I got to stand and take it?"

Calhoon's eyes picked him out. In his late thirties, Barney Dunn was podgy, buck-toothed, his clothes long unwashed and tattered. The other men stood well away from him, for he hardly ever bathed, and his smell was as rank as his mouth.

"I mean that, yeah," Calhoon said. "Dunn, you're new here, just drifted in two weeks ago, but you've been here long enough to understand the situation. Right now, we're walkin' on eggs with these Indians, and will be until our wagons come in from Colorado." He turned to the big man with graying hair who served as range boss. "Pitt, maybe you'd better stick close to Dunn. He's not used to

the Comanch' like the rest of us. Make sure he stays out of trouble."

"Hell," Dunn whined, "I don't need no mother hen! I'm a grown man! And if—"

"You hush," Pitt said. "Man, our hair's what's at stake here. You stay with me and you mind your manners, or I'll coldcock you myself. Understand?"

There was more, but Calhoon did not wait to hear it. Turning, he watched the spectacle out there on the prairie.

The Indians had seen Elias by now, and they formed line, forty of them, and, screaming like demons, charged, their horses racing. When they did that, Whitton put the colt into a streaking run, straight for the Comanche line. As they closed in on one another, one man and forty, it seemed inevitable that they must collide.

But the miracle of horsemanship Calhoon had seen before took place again. Just as collision was certain, Elias checked his horse. Haunches gathered, it stopped immediately. Simultaneously, the whole Comanche line skidded to a halt in a boil of dust. When it settled, Whitton's mount was head to head with that of the big Indian in the center, who wore a spread of feathers in his hair. Then the two men, the Negro and Quanah, son of the famed chief Noconah, first embraced, and then shook hands.

"Look at them niggers hug one another," Dunn said disgustedly, from behind Calhoon.

"Shut your mouth," Pitt said.

Now Elias turned his mount. Flanked by Quanah on one side and by an Indian Calhoon did not recognize on the other, he trotted toward the ranch, the rest of the Comanches strung out behind. Sun glittered on greased, coppery bodies, glanced off rifle barrels and metal lance heads. Calhoon's throat was dry. Forty warriors against fourteen Rancho Bravo men. And there were hundreds, thousands, more Comanches out there in that huge land. He looked at the fort, built so strongly, to last so long, and thought of sandcastles he'd constructed as a child at the Carolina seashore, how proud and solid they had looked—and how the first incoming tide had washed them

away without a trace. Rancho Bravo could be obliterated just as quickly by a different kind of tide, he knew; all that stood between it and destruction was Elias Whitton.

This thing they called Rancho Bravo had begun a year ago, after war's end, when Henry Gannon, a Texas rancher, had returned to the Nueces brush country after four years of combat, to find his parents dead, his land taken by the brush, and every thicket full of unbranded cattle, wild as wolves, which had multiplied like fleas in a carpet for the past four years.

And which had no more value, for there was no market for them. Southern Texas was clogged, choked with cattle, but their war-ruined owners had no cash to hire men to round up and brand them.

Neither did Gannon. But, born and bred a cowman, he set out single-handed to round up and put his iron on what he could, even though soon he would have no range to run them on. The defeated state, now, was in the hands of profiteers, Northern carpetbaggers and speculators swarming like vultures to a carcass. Gannon had powerful enemies among them, and an enormous tax lien he had no hope of paying had been clapped on his land. He was finished, and he knew it. And yet, he went on working, alone, for there was nothing else to do.

Then Elias Whitton rode in from the west, looking for work, willing to accept food and a place to sleep as pay. And he had brought the spark that kindled what was to become Rancho Bravo.

Before the war, Elias had been a slave on a Texas ranch. One whipping too many from a brutal master and he had run away—not north, where slavecatchers could find him and bring him back, but west, where there were no white men at all—the vast, unknown lands beyond the Pecos: Comanche country.

As a slave, he'd been the master horsebreaker of his ranch; and it was his knowledge of horses that had saved him when, out there in their country, the Indians had spotted him. They had come after him in relays, like coyotes after a pronghorn, but Whitton had raised and

trained the tough little pinto he was mounted on, and he had handled it with such skill that, before they finally took him, he had run their best horses into the ground. Such horsemanship, in Comanche eyes, was nothing less than magic, for they considered themselves the best horsemen who had ever lived. Surely here was big medicine, and instead of killing Whitton, they had taken him into the tribe, to learn what he could teach them. Adopted, given the name Dark Rider, he had become a full-fledged Comanche warrior, had remained with the high-plains Comanches for six years, marrying an Indian woman.

But she had died in childbirth; so had the baby. It was not something Whitton would talk about, except to say: "I couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand to stay where we had been together and everything reminded me of her. And I'd heard this new freedom had done been passed and I figured to come back and try it. . . ."

Together, he and Henry Gannon dug wild cattle from the brush, branded and herd-broke them. And, one night, aware now of the hopelessness of Gannon's situation, Elias struck the spark as they sat around a campfire.

"Henry, you got cattle, thousands of 'em, but soon you lose your land, and you got no grass to feed 'em. Well . . . I know where there is grass. Miles and miles of grass, from one side of the sky to the other, and not a cow has ever cropped a mouthful. Out there beyond the Pecos—in Comanche country."

Grass. To a cattleman, the most magic word. Gannon's imagination caught fire instantly.

"And I'm a Comanche warrior, with good connections. And I think this. I think that if somehow we could move your cattle out there, I could deal with the Comanches. I think if we played square with 'em and furnished 'em with trade goods, and let 'em eat our beef when buffalo was scarce, they'd give us land." His eyes gleamed. "The place I got in mind is above the Big Bend of the Rio Bravo. I think out there a man could start a ranch like nothin' anybody ever seen before, maybe the biggest in Texas. Hell, maybe the biggest in the world!"

It was a wild idea, a crazy dream, for two men, dead

broke and alone. And yet, it made sense to Henry Gannon. They talked, far into the night, and Gannon remembered suddenly a scrap of rumor. "Elias, the mines of Colorado! Pourin' out gold and silver—but they been cut off from beef for years, account of the war! I've heard they'd pay a hell of a price for anything with horns and hooves, but nobody can get a herd there because of the Comanches! But, now, you say we could make a deal with them and—" The idea was like a bonfire in him now. "—we could take a big herd out there, split it at the Pecos! Drive half to Colorado, sell it. Use the other half, set up a ranch out there in the Big Bend! Why, we could get rich—if we could make it with the Comanches!"

"I think we can," Elias answered.

"Then we'll do it! I don't know how, but, by God, we'll do it! We'll call it . . . call it Rancho Bravo! And if it goes, you're in for half!"

Dreaming was one thing, reality another. There was still only the pair of them, still no money, and still Gannon's enemies to overcome, who would fight to keep as many unbranded cattle as possible on the range they took from Gannon. So, their dream of Ranco Bravo was hung on dead center, for all their enthusiasm—until Loosh Calhoon had joined them.

GTT, *Gone to Texas*. That, Loosh supposed, was what the courthouse records back in South Carolina showed by his name, now. Before the war he had owned a vast plantation, many slaves, in Carolina. After Appomattox he'd come home to find his slaves freed and gone, his land swallowed up by taxes. Bankrupt, dispossessed, he'd headed west, on the trail of the brutal prison guard who'd tortured him until doctors had had to saw off that right hand of his.

The trail of vengeance led him to the Nueces brush country, for the man he sought was the son of Gannon's enemy. He'd made common cause with Henry and Elias against the Weymouth family, had devised a plan to get the men they needed: Give a man one cow of his own for every Rancho Bravo cow he put an iron on. Broke,

desperate, hard-bitten Texas cowhands, combat veterans all, flocked to Rancho Bravo then—for a chance like that, they'd have fought the devil and all his demons himself and driven the herd straight through hell.

So there were three partners in Rancho Bravo, then, and they were joined soon by a fourth. Philip Killraine, West Pointer, commanded a troop of occupation cavalry in the district. And he had cause to hate Gannon's enemies, too, when they tried to ruin his career because he'd not let his command be used for underhanded, political schemes. Also, he, too, had been stirred by the dream of Rancho Bravo. He'd resigned his commission, joined on as partner, supplying the one thing the others lacked: enough hard cash to buy supplies necessary for the drive beyond the Pecos.

And somehow the four of them and their Texas men had brought it off. They gathered four thousand longhorns, the greatest herd Texas had ever seen put together. Defeated, not without a lot of bloodshed, the forces that had tried to block them. And pushed those cattle west, toward the Pecos.

At San Antonio, Loosh and Killraine's sister Evelyn had been married; she'd gone on ahead by stage to Denver City, Colorado. Meanwhile, there was still fighting ahead of Rancho Bravo, against both man and nature: Apache raiding parties, white cattle thieves; and the land itself, with its terrible electrical storms and the stampedes they caused, its vast waterless stretches where cattle died, a hundred hazards Calhoon had not dreamed of, many worse than any war.

Each of the four partners by that time had his own clear-cut responsibilities. Gannon, the master cattleman, was trail boss; Loosh Calhoon, fighter and tactician, was in charge of the herd's defenses; Killraine, a New Englander with a head for money, in charge of financing and supply; and Whitton was the guide, across country only he had ever traveled, and peacemaker with the Indians.

And of the four of them, Calhoon knew, Elias was the only one indispensable. Others could handle cattle, lead

in battle, deal with finances—but only Whitton knew the Indians, spoke their language, and, as Calhoon had learned, held rank and prestige among them. He bore the heaviest burden of all of them, and without him Rancho Bravo would never have had a chance. The herd would never have reached the Pecos, or if it had, the Comanches would have demolished it long since and taken every man's scalp.

But, thanks to Elias, they had brought it off—so far. At the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos, they had split the herd, Gannon and Killraine shoving two thousand head north to the mines of Colorado, hoping for a sale that would bring in a fortune in hard gold, Calhoon and Whitton pushing the remainder on west, to this splendid grassland high above the Big Bend of the Rio, to build their ranch. . . .

And, Loosh thought, watching Elias riding toward the fort with the Indians, a year ago, if someone had told him he'd be in business with a black man as equal partner, he'd have laughed. But what he had seen of Whitton had wiped out all his old ingrained prejudice. Out here in this new country, what counted was the man and not the color of the skin. And though most of the Texans, with their Southern heritage and the bitterness of defeat, still did not feel that way, Calhoon was glad to acknowledge that Elias Whitton was a man he was proud to work with, and one he was glad to call his friend.

Someday, Calhoon hoped, the other men would see that, too. Meanwhile, though, he'd had to stay behind, despite his eagerness to meet his wife in Colorado, for the simple reason that these Texans would not take orders from a black man, even if he were an owner. Elias was really the one in charge here, but Calhoon had to serve as his mouthpiece, or nothing would have gotten done. It was a bitter situation for Whitton, but he accepted it with a quiet matter-of-factness Calhoon admired. His attitude was that there was a job to do, a ranch to build, and the main thing was to get it built and going.

Meanwhile, because he knew the land and knew the Indians, Elias gave the orders, Calhoon passed them on,

and the men carried them out. And, watching those tribesmen lope toward him in all their fierce, barbaric array, Calhoon took comfort at the sight of Elias leading them. Rancho Bravo was in big trouble with the Comanche tribe; nobody but Whitton could get them out of it.

As the Indians came into the ranch yard, Calhoon cast one last glance at his men, alert, tense, yet carefully unwarlike, and went to meet the warriors.

Chapter Two

"HAU, QUANAH." Calhoon raised his left hand in a sign of greeting.

"*Hau,* Calhoon." The man looking down at him from the roan horse was tall and solid, handsome, one of the finest specimens of human being Calhoon had ever seen. Son of the chief Noconah and a white captive, Cynthia Parker, he wore his hair in long black braids; his skin was dark bronze. He and his horse both jangled and clanked with ornaments. He carried a Spencer carbine, wore on his hip a Colt revolver. His face, Calhoon saw with relief, was unpainted. Quanah smiled, his gray eyes, startling in such a countenance, lighting. "Good to see you." His English was fluent, partly learned from his mother, more from Elias Whitton and other Americans the tribe had encountered. His right hand also came up in greeting.

Then Whitton said, "Loosh. This is Black Bull Man."

Calhoon faced the rider on Whitton's other flank; the hawklike face staring down at him held none of the friendship he had read on Quanah's. It was lean, hard, painted

in strange scrolls and symbols, black eyes lambent, smouldering, thin mouth beneath high-bridged nose set in a tight contemptuous line. *"Hau,"* Calhoon said.

Black Bull Man did not reply, only stared wordlessly at Calhoon for a pair of seconds. He was in his middle twenties, Loosh judged, and must already be a brilliant warrior. A string of feathers trailed from the horned buffalo headskin he wore; another dangled from the barrel of his Henry rifle. On he left arm there was a war shield, richly painted, and four scalps hung from it. Calhoon sucked in breath as he saw that one was blond. The hatred in the black eyes was like a blow across the face.

"Hau," Black Bull said at last, packing hostility into the single syllable. He looked beyond Calhoon, eyes raking over the Rancho Bravo men, who lounged some distance away, each armed, but careful to present no threat. His mouth twisted. "So this is the famous Rancho Bravo outfit," he said, in perfect English, Texas-accented. "My God, we could eat you alive and still be hungry."

Calhoon started at the sound of that fluent white man's speech coming from the Indian. Black Bull grinned. "Surprised? Don't let it shake you. They tried to make a Texan out of me for fourteen years."

Elias said tensely, "Black Bull was a captive for a spell, Loosh. The Rangers took him when he was a kid. He was raised up in East Texas. But he's back with the Comanch' now. He's in the Quahadi band, the Antelopes."

"I'm a chief of the Quahadi band," Black Bull said. "A *war* chief. Don't forget that, Whitton."

"Yeah," Whitton said. "Loosh, tell the men to git some fires goin'. I promised plenty beef to these people. You and me and Quanah and Black Bull are gonna talk. The rest are goin' out and kill two, three Rancho Bravo cows. They can eat while we make medicine."

"Sure." Calhoon gave the orders, while Quanah swung his horse, spoke to the warriors. When he finished, the whole band of Indians shrieked approval, spun their mounts. Calhoon watched as they thundered out of the canyon, howling, yipping, and scattered across the prairie to hunt down the cattle like buffalo.

"All right," Pitt said, in the following silence, "let's git some wood and chips together."

"Damn . . ." Barney Dunn again. "What are we, tame niggers for a bunch of—"

"Shut your trap," Pitt rasped. Dunn looked at him, slouched off. "Let's go," Pitt said, and the others followed.

Black Bull Man grinned unpleasantly. "Tame niggers," he said mockingly. "Neat way of puttin' it, eh, Dark Rider?"

"Let's go in the house," Elias said.

"Sure." Black Bull spun his big spotted stallion, and Calhoon had to be quick to dodge its hindquarters. The Indian dismounted gracefully, dropped the single rein. "The stud will stand, Calhoon. Tell your people not to go near him. They do, he'll eat 'em alive." Then, ahead of the others, he strode into the fort.

It had only two rooms. One enclosed the spring and served for cool storage; the main one held the long tables and benches at which the men ate and, in the neat military order on which Calhoon insisted, extra weapons and stored horse gear and tools. Quanah had been here before, but Black Bull Man paused inside the door, raking the interior with eyes that missed nothing. Like, Calhoon thought, following and closing the door, a spy in an enemy camp.

Elias said loudly, "Let's sit down and have some coffee and a smoke. Then we'll talk." His eyes met Calhoon's and he jerked his head. "Loosh, help me bring the stuff, will you?"

"Sure." Cooking was done in an open leanto outside, but there was always a pot of coffee on the coals in the big fireplace at the main room's far end.

As they went to it, Elias whispered, "It's bad. Worse than I figgered with Black Bull along. He hates whites worse'n poison, and he's a power in the tribe. We got to watch our step." Then, in a normal voice, he said, "Get the sugar and some cigars."

When they brought coffee and cups and sugar and humidor to the table, Quanah was already seated there,

face expressionless, but Black Bull was prowling, examining the loopholes in the walls. As Calhoon took cigars from the humidor, Black Bull Man grinned without humor. "Nice. Very nice. Whoever laid this out knew what he was doing."

"I laid it out," Calhoon said. He handed Black Bull Man a cigar.

"Did you now? A dozen men could stand off an army from in here." He took the cigar, bit off the end. "Which army did you have in mind?"

Calhoon met his eyes. "Any that might try to do us harm," he said.

"The Comanches, for instance?"

"I hope not," Calhoon said. "The Comanches are our friends."

Black Bull Man spat out the tip of the cigar.

"Coffee's ready," Elias said.

Coffee, heavily laced with sugar, was a treat for the Indians; so were the cigars, dry as they were. Calhoon followed suit as Quanah, Black Bull Man, and Whitton dedicated their first few puffs to earth, sky, and the compass points. For a while, they smoked and drank in silence. Then Quanah said, in English, "We'd better talk."

"In Comanche," Black Bull said.

"No, in American. Calhoon doesn't know Comanche," Quanah said.

"He'd better learn it damned quick."

Quanah turned his heavy, majestic head and looked at Black Bull and spoke in the sonorous language of the tribe, with its heavy, rolling "r," its lack of any sound for "l." It was obvious there was no friendship between him and Black Bull, and, if this had been the Army, Calhoon would have said that Quanah was pulling rank. With relief, he saw Black Bull yield; at least Quanah was still in charge. "We talk in American," the half-breed chief said finally. Then he arose, for Indians spoke better on their feet. "Elias tells me the trade goods still ain't come."

"I'm afraid not."

Quanah's face was grave. "Noconah, my father, and

the rest of the people won't be pleased when they hear that." He took the cigar from his mouth. "Three moons ago, the bands of the People were camped on the Middle Concho: the Wanderers, Antelopes, and Needle People all together. And there you came, out of nowhere, with more wohaws than we'd ever seen before. When our scouts brought the news, a lot of us wanted to hit you then and there and rub you out. After all, you got no business here. This is *our* land. We signed a paper with the Army two years ago; they said it was our land and no whites would come on it. What saved you was that Dark Rider—" he indicated Whitton "—came with you. So, instead of fightin', we talked."

Naked to the waist, hard and lean, unlike so many Comanches who were, by and large, pudgy, he went on. "Dark Rider was a big man among us and our hearts were sad when he went away. We were glad to see him back, and we listened to what he and the white man, Gannon, told us and thought it over. You wanted us to give you land, let you live among us and raise your longhorn wohaws. In return, when you sold part of your wohaws in the towns at the Shining Mountains in the north, you'd get from the white men there all the things we need and bring 'em to us."

He paused. "We need a lot. Four years, now, we've had no trade. We used to get what we needed from the Comancheros, the traders from Mexico or Santa Fe. But they don't come now, because of your war, and because of the war in Mexico—"

"Juarez against the French and Austrians," Calhoon put in.

"Yes. Even when we raid down there, there's no guns or powder and ball to be had. We used to raid the wagon trains on the Santa Fe Trail, but they don't move anymore, and even if they did, the paper we signed with the Grandfather in Washington made us promise not to, so we could hold our land here without havin' to fight your army."

He leaned forward, hands resting on the table. "Anyhow, we are in bad shape. Our old guns are givin' out,

our lead and powder's scarce. Dark Rider said your Rancho Bravo would bring us more, and all the other things we need: cloth, knives, axes, pots— But it ain't come. It was supposed to be here two weeks ago, and we sent messengers and the word was, wait. Well, we've waited and it still ain't here." He straightened up. "Now we're runnin' out of time. The buffalo've come south. We got to start our fall hunt for winter meat and robes. And we got to have guns and ammunition, or people are goin' to go hungry." He pointed to a Henry rifle leaning against the wall. "Guns like that, that can kill a dozen buffalo while a man with arrows or lance kills one or two. You promised us, you said a hundred rifles and a hundred six-shooters for every band of the tribe and plenty bullets. Now, we got to hunt. The buffalo won't wait, the sun to dry the meat won't wait, neither will the winter. We've kept our bargain, but you ain't kept yours. What are we goin' to do?"

Calhoon faced him, mustering dignity, which was important when talking with Indians. "It's true," he said. "You made promises and you have kept them. We made promises and something's gone wrong. The wagons from Colorado *are* three weeks late. And we do have to ask you to wait a little longer. But they'll be here soon." He paused. "Something's gone wrong, I'm not sure what, but it can't be anything serious. Maybe it's taken them more time to sell the herd than they counted on. Or something like that. We've had no word, and I don't know. But I do know this. You can trust and count on Henry Gannon and Phil Killraine. In due time, they'll be here, with everything we promised."

"Due time." Quanah looked at him bleakly. "How long's that?"

"I don't know. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next day. Maybe another week—"

"A week!" Spitting the words, Black Bull Man bounded to his feet. "Quanah just told you, Calhoon, the buffalo won't wait! We should have started our hunt two weeks ago. We put it off. Now you tell us to put it off another week! And you're not even sure we'll have the guns

then. Pahh!" He turned to Quanah. "I told you! A white man's promises are like trying to hold water in your hand! They always run out between your fingers!"

Anger rose in Calhoon. "You know a lot about white men! What makes you such an expert?"

Black Bull Man faced him, grinning strangely. "I got to be an expert the hard way, Calhoon. Living with 'em. Growin' up white for nearly fourteen years." His eyes seemed to glitter. "Injuns aren't the only ones that take captives." His voice was low, intense, as he went on. "Twenty years ago, a bunch of Texas Rangers hit the Quahadi when they were in winter camp on the lower Colorado. It was just a small party of Comanches, not the whole band, only four or five lodges. The Rangers wiped 'em out, man, woman, child, like shootin' coyotes, and burned the lodges with the bodies in 'em. My father, mother, two sisters, and my brother; they went."

His chest swelled as he sucked in breath. "I almost did, too. They found me hidden in some robes, just before they fired my lodge. Some wanted to shoot me, too, but one saved me and took me home, raised me like his own. He was, you see, Calhoon, a God-fearin', upright man." He shook his head. "Oh, he feared God all right. I've seen him read the Bible and whip his ol' lady and his kids, includin' me, until we howled for mercy. I've seen him pray in church and cheat his neighbors in a horse trade on Monday mornin'! Money, work, and God, that was all Jabez Dale thought of—and not our God, the Sun, but a mean old white man with a long gray beard somewhere up in the sky. The kind of God who'd burn you alive for not lickin' his boots! And Jabez Dale tried to be just like him! You'd better lick his boots, or he'd lay the whip on you, for the good of your immortal soul!"

Quanah stared, trying to follow this.

"Well, I took it long as I could, Calhoon, 'til I was nearly grown. I worked his farm and helped him stuff pepper in the noses and the asses of the old nags he traded until they pranced like warhorses! I hauled his wood and worked his fields and stayed quiet when his kids beat me up because I was a dirty Injun. I learned to read and

write and speak the language and all about how the white man lives. And I hated it, every minute of it!"

He grinned, coldly. "One night, he dragged me out to the barn to lay a whippin' on me. I was near grown then, and I took a pitchfork and ran it through him and I ran out. I'd seen the Penateka, the tame Comanches on the reservation, and I went to them and they hid me. They passed me on, back to my own people, the Quahadis."

Black Bull paused. "Had to learn to speak the language. Had to learn all over to be an Indian. But I learned, you bet I learned. Because I'd had a gut full of the white man. And if it was up to me, Dark Rider or no, you'd never have been allowed to reach the Pecos in the first place. Because I'm all Indian, now, more Indian than you'll ever meet again. And I know all your white man's lies and tricks and cheats!" He turned to Quanah. "Why drag it out? The guns aren't here. They've broken the promise they made to us when they came. They've no right any longer to stay on Comanche land!"

Quanah stared at him a moment. "That's not for either of us to say. This was an agreement made between Rancho Bravo and my father, the head chief, and the council. They—" He broke off. Outside, there was a drum of hooves, the high-pitched shrilling of Comanche warriors. Calhoon felt the short hair on his neck rise.

Elias said, "They got the beef. They comin' in to cook it. We had better finish in a hurry. We'll be needed out there. Quanah. Black Bull Man . . ." Elias stood there, short, stocky, yet with dignity, facing them. "It's more than just the trade goods," he said. "You need them, yeah. But there's something you need worse. And it's why Noconah let us settle here—not just what we could furnish you in trade. But what we could do for you when the Army comes back west."

He paused. "Ever since the war broke out, the Army's been gone from out here. But the war's finished now, and soon the Army will be comin' back. And the question is, when it does, will it keep the promises it made you in that paper Noconah signed?"

"They won't," Black Bull said fiercely. "We'll have to fight 'em!"

"You can fight 'em," Elias said, "but you can't win! The Army that'll be coming back here'll be bigger than the Comanches, bigger than all the tribes, with cannons, like Carson had at Adobe Walls, when we fought him there. You can't fight cannons, Black Bull, and you can't fight the whole United States!"

"The thing is," Quanah said, "when they come, will they keep the promises they made when we signed that paper with 'em?"

"That's what we talked about with your father and the council, you remember. Nobody knows what they will do. But it's Noconah's idea and ours that if you let Rancho Bravo stay on this land and grow, when the white men come, there'll be white men already here to speak to them for the Comanches. We'll make sure they don't trick and cheat you. And we'll have the power then to do it. We'll have lots of money, and among the whites, that's power. And Killraine has a mother's brother high in the council of the Grandfather in Washington. Rancho Bravo will stand beside the Comanches, work for them, when the white men come, use their power for them. And while the trade goods are important, that's more important. You need our power. And if you rub us out now—and you can do it—you'll not have it when you need it."

Quanah nodded. "I know all that. Still, what good's all the talk without the goods? I know what you mean, my father knows, but how explain it to the others?"

Whitton nodded. "Yeah. We've put you in a spot. And I know how bad you need the guns." He paused. "I ask this. Give me one week more. Where are you camped?"

"The Springs of the People," Quanah answered.

"Right, Comanche Springs. All right. In seven days, I'll be there with enough guns for you to start your hunt, and plenty of ammunition."

"Elias," Calhoon began, but Whitton cut him off with a gesture.

"That's a promise," Elias said.

"Another promise," Black Bull jibed bitterly. "You don't shoot buffalo with promises."

Elias turned to him, and somehow seemed to grow taller; despite his range clothes, there was something in his bearing then that made him akin to both chiefs, a dignity Calhoon had never seen in him before.

"My promise," he said. He tapped his chest. "Mine. Not a white man's. Dark Rider, of the Noconahs. A Comanche's word."

Calhoon opened and closed his mouth. *And if the wagons aren't here by then?* he wondered.

He read the same question in Quanah's eyes. But, slowly, Quanah nodded. "All right. We'll wait for you there, the whole tribe, all three bands. I can speak for my father when I say that. But, Dark Rider—" his voice was full of warning. "—if you don't come and bring the guns, my father will be made into a fool and liar before the council."

"Noconah is like my father, too," Elias said. "Don't worry. I'll not do that to him. I'll be there, with the guns."

"Or we'll come after you!" Black Bull snapped. "I can get forty men to follow me, enough to chew up Rancho Bravo and spit it out!" He paused. "Noconah is married to a white woman, he thinks the way to deal with whites is trust 'em! I think the way's to kill every white who sets foot on Comanche land! Well, in seven days we'll see who's right!" He wheeled, stalked out, slammed the door behind him.

Quanah let out a breath. "His heart is bad toward you. But he has his reasons."

"I understand," Elias said.

"But you must understand, he does have power, too, a lot of it. When Black Bull came back to the Quadahi, he wasn't trusted. He was a Comanche, but he didn't know Comanche ways. For a while, he was laughed at by the other young men—but they don't laugh anymore. He learned everything he had to know and learned it fast; he dreamed a buffalo dream and has the buffalo medicine, and he's brave and lucky and always wins when he makes war. If he keeps on, someday he'll be one of the greatest

war chiefs the People have ever had. People follow him, and not only the Quahadis. He's Comanche all the way through, now, and . . . someday he wants to be head chief." His eyes went from Calhoon to Whitton. "Dark Rider, if you aren't at the Springs in seven days, my father won't be able to hold him. You understand?"

"I understand," Elias said. "And I'll . . ."

His words were drowned by a weird, savage trumpeting. The men stood frozen. Then it came again—the scream of an infuriated horse. A man cried out, hooves pounded, and Calhoon yelled something and made for the door, Quanah and Elias right behind.

Outside, he halted, gaping. Barney Dunn was streaking toward the cottonwoods down the canyon like a frightened rabbit, with Black Bull's big spotted stallion, neck outstretched, teeth bared, after him like a giant hound.

"Help!" Dunn bawled. "Help, somebody!" The stud almost had him now. Calhoon reached for his gun. Then Dunn put on an extra burst of speed, made the grove, where fires burned and meat cooked. As the stallion's jaws opened, Dunn leaped, caught a cottonwood's lower limb, curled his body like a worm's, swung up, clawing with his feet. The stud's teeth fastened on his thigh. Dunn howled, as chaps and pants alike ripped loose. Then he was on the limb, uninjured, while, below, the stud shook cloth and leather in its jaw as a terrier shakes a rat. Then, throwing the rags aside, snorting, it circled the tree, neck arched, pawing the ground.

Next to Quanah's horse before the door, Black Bull Man stood with hands on hips, laughing richly, his rifle cradled in his arm.

"Goddammit!" Dunn yelled in terror. "Somebody shoot that stud!" The sound of his voice enraged the stallion. It screamed and reared again, for all the world like a coonhound, Calhoon thought, with its quarry treed. "All right!" Dunn shrieked. "I'll do it!" Straddling a limb, holding tightly with his left hand, he fumbled with his right for his Colt.

Instantly, Black Bull's laughter pinched off. Suddenly his rifle came up, lined on Dunn.

Calhoon stood frozen, but Quanah and Elias moved. Quanah was a flash of copper, throwing himself at Black Bull, seizing the rifle barrel, jerking it down. The gun went off, bullet plowing into the ground. At the same time, Elias Whitton's Colt fired twice, almost in Calhoon's ear. Bark sprayed from the limb Dunn straddled; Dunn flinched back, nearly fell, and held to his perch with both hands. Whitton's voice was a roar: "Dunn, you touch that gun, I'll kill you! Don't you move!"

Quanah had wrenched the rifle from Black Bull's grasp. Smoking Colt still in hand, Elias whirled. "Black Bull! Call off that stud! You hear? *Call him off!*"

Black Bull shook his head, face contorted. Quanah yelled something at him; the two men confronted one another for an instant like enraged bulls. Quanah yelled again; Black Bull's face changed. His hand went to a piece of eagle's wingbone hanging from a string of claws around his neck. He put it to his mouth, blew a piping whistle.

Instantly the stallion turned, ears pricked. Black Bull piped again; the big horse trotted to him, shaking its head, the feathers in its mane dancing. Coming to Black Bull, wholly docile now, it nuzzled him like a puppy.

Black Bull scratched its topknot, his face a mask of fury as he stared at Quanah, who stood panting, the rifle in his hand. Quanah looked back for just an instant, then shouted something in Comanche to the warriors around the fires beneath the cottonwoods.

When his voice trailed off, Whitton yelled, "It's all right now, you Rancho Bravo men! It's over! Cook your meat and eat it and have your fun."

There was still a moment's silence. Then Pitt stared at Dunn, clinging to his limb, and suddenly broke into laughter. "Look at the treed possum!" he howled. "Ol' Possum Dunn!"

It broke the spell. Now the other men were laughing. The Indians joined in, pointing, gesturing, and for a time red and white men all roared with mirth.

"Jesus," Elias Whitton said thinly, his Colt still in hand. His face was ashy; and only then did Calhoon realize how

close it had been in those few seconds. If Black Bull had shot Dunn, the feast beneath the trees would immediately have turned into a battle, its only possible outcome the destruction of Rancho Bravo. His own knees went weak.

"I'll have my rifle, now," Black Bull said harshly.

After a second's hesitation, Quanah passed it back.

"Come on," Elias said, his voice unsteady. "Let's take hold of Dunn before he gits us all killed." And he strode toward the grove with Calhoon following.

"I didn't mean no harm," Dunn whined.

They were in the house, now: Calhoon, Whitton, the two chiefs, and Barney Dunn. His holster empty, confronted by the four of them, Dunn cringed against the wall.

"No harm," Black Bull rasped. He turned to Quanah. "When I went outside, I caught him going through your saddlebags. Minute I spoke, he came at me, spoutin' cuss words. That's where he made his mistake—nobody comes at me like that around my warhorse. He's trained to tear apart the man that does. He took after this man; you saw the rest."

"Goin' in Quanah's saddlebags?" Elias whirled on Dunn. "Why?"

"I tell you—" Dunn licked his lips. "I didn't mean no harm. I jest—"

"Answer!" Calhoon snapped.

Dunn's eyes shuttled back and forth. "All right. I seen somethin' looked like a bottle, way it poked out. I thought there might be some booze in there."

"Whiskey?" Quanah was astonished. "You thought I was carrying whiskey?"

"Well, we ain't had nothin' to drink on this place since I come here and I was dry as hell, and— Well, it was a chance. . . ."

"A chance!" Quanah grinned bleakly. "Man, don't you know that Rancho Bravo had to agree not to allow whiskey on its land before my father would even deal with them? That's why you get nothing to drink. We've got enough troubles without firewater drivin' our people crazy. And

you thought *I'd* have some?" Then his face was wholly savage. "What you saw was my medicine bundle, rolled up in deerskin. And if you'd laid hands on it, I'd kill you myself. It's sacred to me and me alone."

"You mean you Injuns can dictate whether or not I take a drink?" Dunn summoned bluster, indignation, from somewhere.

"No," Calhoon cut in. "Rancho Bravo dictates that. Yeah, we've promised not to sell or give whiskey to any Indian people. But that rule about drinking was made by Gannon, back in San Antonio. Men shut up together long as we've been, booze and gambling only causes fights, maybe killings. You were told about that when you signed on. You do your work, you mind your self, you can swill your fill in Colorado with the others when the rest of the crew gets back from there and we swap over. But here you stay dry." He backed away a step, raked his eyes up and down Barney Dunn. "You don't like it, you can ride out now. You stay on, you'll abide by our rules. And any more trouble, one little speck, and you're gone, and how you get back to Fort Sumner or any other settlement on your own, through Injun country, without Rancho Bravo protection, is your problem. Now, which is it? Go or stay?"

Dunn's face was pasty. "Stay," he mumbled finally.

"All right. Get back out there, eat your fill of beef, keep your mouth shut. You'll get your gun back later."

"I—" Then Dunn read Calhoon's expression, clamped it off, shuffled out the door.

When he had gone, Elias hitched up his gun belt. "Well, we'd better show ourselves out there, too. We can make medicine while we eat."

Black Bull Man shook his head. "There's no more medicine to make." He faced Calhoon. "Whitton's saved your hide again. But I'll guarantee that this week's the last he'll buy for you if those guns aren't delivered." Then he opened the door. "I'll eat with my own people. White-man smell spoils the taste of food." He went out, and he did not come near them again that day, avoiding every Rancho Bravo man until two hours later, when the In-

dians left, racing out with as much spectacular fanfare as when they'd come, and with Quanah's last words ringing in Calhoon's ears: "Black Bull's right; those guns must be there."

Chapter Three

IT WAS LONG past dark when Whitton's weary horse, sensing it was nearing home, broke into a trot. Elias, slumped in the saddle, maintained alertness with part of his mind; that was instinctive. The other part wrestled with fatigue, disappointment, and the burden of responsibility crushing down on him like a giant, leaden hand. Two days' hard scouting due north, and no wagons, no sign of wagons. Only five days left before Quanah's deadline.

And Quanah meant it; Elias was under no illusions about that. Outsiders had no idea of the continual politics played in an Indian tribe. Chiefs could lead and make their will felt only so long as their tribesmen followed them: there were no fixed terms of office, no chiefdom by inheritance. Power was there for anyone who wanted to seize it, who could prove he was smarter, luckier, stronger than the present chief. Noconah and Quanah had laid their prestige on the line for Rancho Bravo; if Rancho Bravo made fools of them, Black Bull would push his advantage to the limit. And when he got the power, he would go to war—against Rancho Bravo, against any white man who set foot in Comanche country. That would mean the destruction of Rancho Bravo—and in the long

run it would mean the destruction of the Comanche people, too.

Now, ahead, Elias saw the gleam of campfires in the canyon's mouth, in this clean air clearly visible even a pair of miles away.

The destruction of the Comanche people, Elias thought again. And that, of course, was what he had helped build Rancho Bravo to prevent. He had deceived his partners. They had risked everything to win what white men valued: gold, power, riches to pass on to their children. And they thought his motives were like their own. But they were not. They built Rancho Bravo for the whites; he was determined it must survive for the sake of the Comanches.

It was not that he did not admire, respect, even love his three white partners. The four of them made a damned fine team. Each knew his business, pulled his load and more.

All the same, they lived in a world closed off to him, one which, no matter how rich he might become and despite the fact that he was now a free American citizen, he could never enter, because his skin was black.

But that did not matter, either, because he no longer thought of himself as black. In his own mind, he was a Comanche. He had been one all along, but he had not known it until they had captured him and made him one officially.

And then, for the runaway slave, it was as if he had come home after a long journey. His years with the Nüma, the People, had been the happiest of his life. Never before nor since had he known such freedom, such acceptance and belonging. And he would never have left them if Woman Like A Willow had not died.

Willow Woman. . . . He thought of her, warm and soft by him in the robes at night, laughing at his jokes, cooking his meals, making his clothes, growing big with his child. . . . And then she was gone and the child, too, and something had happened to his mind. Now he could hardly remember his decision to leave the tribe, drift back to the Nueces, to civilization. It had been like awakening from

a dream to find himself in white man's country again.

And what he had seen there frightened him. Four years of war had turned the United States of America into something new and strange. There were soldiers everywhere, and white men from the East pouring into Texas like a river. Desperate for land, desperate for money, and used to fighting, soldiers, settlers, speculators, cowmen—they all seemed parts of a giant engine, a huge machine like a locomotive, building up a terrific head of steam, poised now to smash on west, inexorable, unstoppable. A machine that, when it rolled, would crush anything that tried to block it—including the Comanches.

They were doomed unless someone did something, and he had tried to think of what he could do. That was when he broached the idea of moving cattle west to Comanche land. If a ranch could be built out there, one owned by rich and powerful and decent white men who could come to know and trust the Indians, maybe that ranch and its white owners could be used as a buffer to keep that great engine of westward progress from crushing the tribe completely. Men like Gannon and Calhoon and Philip Killraine could deal with the Army and the other whites when they came west again. Only money, power, could block the great machine; Rancho Bravo had to have that and be willing to use it on the behalf of the Comanches. . . .

But fust, white men and red had to know and trust one another, live together, build up a network of mutual interest so strong and tight that each would have to defend the other, whatever came. Slyly, he had worked for two objectives: success for Rancho Bravo and a sharing of its destiny with the Comanches.

And now— Damn it, what had happened in Colorado? It had to be something serious, so bad that even Gannon and Killraine could not handle it. Five more days, and if there were still no wagons, then they must either fight or run, and it would all be over, finished, the bright dream of Rancho Bravo, any chance of salvation for the Comanches . . . or of ever himself returning to the People, except maybe as a captured enemy.

The decisions were up to him; Calhoon could not make

them on his own—he did not know Comanches. He had to find some plan, conjure up some miracle. But right now, he was so damned tired. . . .

Then he was tired no longer, but straight up in the saddle, raising his gun. Distant hoofbeats, many riders—He swung around the buckskin to make sure he was not silhouetted against the sky. They were coming from the direction of Rancho Bravo and coming closer.

Then he saw them, and there was no mistaking the tall form of Calhoon in the lead. Hope flamed in Whitton. There was no reason for them to ride out at this time of night like that, unless one of the men out on the range had seen the train from Colorado.

He touched the buckskin with his heels, fresh, now, and revived. Hell, he should have known all along it would be all right; Gannon and Killraine wouldn't let them down. He'd have the goods at Comanche Springs next Saturday and everything would be in order. And then he could relax, enjoy life again, without that great weight always bearing down on him. As he neared the oncoming riders, he cupped hands to mouth. "Halloo! Rancho Bravo! Loosh? It's Whitton!"

Calhoon drew ahead, reached him first, reined in his bay. "Elias?" His voice was full of eagerness. "The wagons? Any sign of 'em?"

"You mean you ain't—?" Whitton let out breath and the weight came down again. "No. I've moved all the time the past few days, hardly stopped to rest, and not a trace. When I seen you ridin' out, I thought maybe you'd had word."

"No such luck." Calhoon's voice was bitter. "No. It's trouble. We've lost a man somehow, somewhere. We're ridin' out to look for him."

"Lost a man? How? Who?"

"I don't know how," Calhoon said disgustedly. "And as for who— Who do you reckon? It's Barney Dunn."

Now the other Rancho Bravo men, five of them, had come up, circling round. "I'm glad you're here," Loosh said. "This kind of thing's really more your stuff."

"All right, what happened?" *Dunn,* Elias thought disgustedly. *I mighta knowed.*

"Hill can tell you better'n I can. He and Dunn were paired today. Hill?"

A young rider spurred forward. A good man, Hill was tired and angry, and his voice betrayed that. "Pitt paired up me and Possum Dunn this mornin' to work that rough country up northwest of here."

Elias nodded. Indians or no, the work of a cattle ranch had to go on, and there was double the usual amount on Rancho Bravo. Not only range-branding, water-hole improvement, and the like, but clearing buffalo off of graze without killing them, exterminating the wolves and coyotes that swarmed across the range—and all this while men, horses, and the cattle, too, learned strange terrain. Shorthanded as they were, Elias had nevertheless laid down the rule that the men must work in pairs because of danger from Indians. Not only would it be risky for a lone man to encounter Comanches of Black Bull's stripe in some remote place, but Mescaleros, Lipans, Kiowas, and Southern Cheyennes also drifted across this country. "Go on."

"Well, up in them breaks we found a waterhole we'd never seen before, a pizen one, a dead cow there already. We had a spade along, so I figured to ditch and drain it. I started diggin' and told Possum to keep watch for Injuns and he could take second turn on the shovel. While I was workin', he rode off a ways and I paid no attention, but then I got tired and when I looked for him, he was gone." Hill spat. "That made me mad as hell. I figured he was hidin' out, doggin' it until I got the hard work done. I mounted, went after him. Struck his trail, followed it about a mile up a draw, and then— Damn it, it just vanished. I'm a fair hand at readin' sign, but I couldn't find a scratch! Just like somethin' had swooped down outa the sky and picked him up."

"Maybe we'd be better off if it had," Whitton snapped, but his mind was working. He knew that country up there, inside out; had scouted it once; had hunted all through it as a Comanche. He knew the waterhole, too, in a jumble

of rocks and low-topped buttes; had meant to have Loosh tell someone to drain it.

"Well, I circled all that country, combed it good. Never did find hide or hair. Then I got scared, figured I'd better get back home and pass the word. Jest got in an hour ago, and we waited awhile. When Dunn didn't show, Cap'n Calhoon said he was a Rancho Bravo man, no matter what, and we had to go to look for him."

"You see any Injun sign?"

"Saw nothin', I tell you."

Pitt, the foreman, said, "You ask me, he's doggin' it out there somewhere. Found himself a shady hidey-hole and went to sleep."

"Not past supper time," Hill said. "Dunn ain't missed a meal yet."

"Then maybe he got tired of the hoorawin' he was takin' after that stud horse chased him up the tree. Us callin' him Possum and all. Maybe he just pulled out for good."

"No," Calhoon said. "We checked. His bedroll and gear are still back there. Not even Dunn's fool enough to leave without that."

Elias nodded, a cold knot of fear growing in his belly. "Well, you're right, we got to look. I reckon we start at that waterhole and work from there. I ride with you."

"Good," Calhoon said with relief. "Pitt, you swap horses with Elias, make sure the men at the ranch keep their heads up."

"Right." Pitt swung down, he and Elias traded mounts. "All I can say is, when you find that bastard, he *better* be in trouble. If he ain't, he sure as hell will be when these men git hold of him. They're all dead tired."

Elias did not answer. Fervently, he hoped that Dunn *was* dogging it, hiding out from work. He hoped that if they found him, what they found would be only a lazy hog of a living man, not a scalped and mutilated corpse. Dunn alive was hated; Dunn dead would be a white man killed by Indians, and these Texas riders would have their vengeance, no matter what it cost Rancho Bravo. . . . He gathered rein, as the men formed up again. The moon

had risen, flooding the vast land with silver. That was good. Calhoon lifted his mutilated arm in the signal to move out. Before he could bring it down, Whitton tensed. "Wait!" he snapped.

Calhoon stared at him. Elias leaned forward in the saddle, head up, broad nostrils flared, like a bird dog scenting quail. He cocked his head. The wind: it was freshening, a northwest wind, and it made a rushing sound across the grasslands.

"Elias?" Calhoon asked.

But there was something else, another sound. Yes, now it was clearer, more distinct.

Calhoon heard it too, swung his head in the direction from which it came. "Son of a bitch," he murmured.

For now, on the wind, it came plainly: a man's voice lifted in discordant, off-key song.

Elias felt the big muscles in his back slacken. "That's Dunn," he said. "He's coming in."

"Yes." Calhoon's relief rang in his voice. "But he must be crazy, bellowing like that."

"He ain't crazy," Elias said, and the muscles tightened again. "Listen."

And now they could make out the words.

> "My sweetheart's a mule in the mines.
> I drive her without any lines.
> On the bumper I sit,
> And tobacco I spit—
> All over my sweetheart's behind!"

Dunn's voice roared on, slurred and thick. "He ain't crazy," Whitton repeated harshly. "The son of a bitch is dead roarin' drunk! And we'd better damned well find out in a hurry where he got the likker, nine hundred miles from nowhere in the middle of Comanche country!" Then he spurred his horse.

When Barney Dunn saw the Rancho Bravo men closing in on him, he pulled up his horse, leaned forward in the saddle, holding with both hands to the horn, and stared.

Then he laughed. "Well! I be damned! Here ol' Cap'n Calhoon and the buck nigger!"

Whitton's temper broke. His hand flashed out, grabbed Dunn's shirt, yanked the man around. "Awright, Dunn, where'd you git it?"

Dunn's face twisted. "Look here, coon, who you think you layin' hands on?" With surprising strength, he slapped Whitton across the face, wrenched free. "I'll show you a thing or two!" He fumbled for his gun.

Calhoon spurred forward, swung his right arm in an arc. The stump of his wrist, wrapped in heavy leather, slammed against Dunn's temple. A one-handed man needed an edge in a fight: Calhoon carried a pound of buckshot wrapped in that binding, an effective blackjack. Dunn sighed and toppled from the saddle.

Calhoon stared down at him, lip curling. "All right, you men load him up and we'll take him in. Hill, I believe you've got a score to settle with him. It's your job to wake him up and get him in shape to talk. I don't care how you do it, but don't hurt him so bad he can't be questioned. When he can make sense, bring him to the house. Elias, you all right?"

"I'm okay," Whitton answered. "Let's go."

With Dunn draped head down across his horse, the cavalcade started back to Rancho Bravo. Whitton and Calhoon fell back behind the others.

"Whiskey," Elias said. "The Comancheros used to bring it in, and they'd rake the tribe clean of everything it had, especially the loot from their raids on Mexico. I've seen a solid silver cross from a Mex church go for a tin cup of booze, a hammered gold Virgin of Guadelupe for the same. I've seen drunk men sell off buffalo robes they needed to git 'em through the winter for a bottle, or their best war and buffalo horses. . . . It ain't their fault, they jest can't help it. Give a Comanche the first drink, he's got to have the second one and he'll sell his soul to git it. And kill you to git the third one, if you don't look out."

"That's why Noconah made us promise not to sell or give a drop to the Comanches or any other tribe?"

"Right. He hates the stuff, because he knows how it

weakens the People. But we'd be fools to, anyhow. No matter where it comes from, if the Comanch' git hold of whiskey, our fat's even more in the fire. A bunch of young men like Black Bull's crowd git likkered up, Noconah nor nothin' on earth could hold 'em back. They'd come after our scalps, and that would mean all-out war. Loosh, we got to find out where the hell Dunn got that firewater, or, no matter whether we git our trade goods in on time or not, we're in for more trouble than we can handle."

"Maybe I shouldn't have hit him." Calhoon looked down at his loaded wrist.

"You had to, or he'da shot somebody or got shot hisself. First thing when we git back to Rancho Bravo, we'd better check the cellar."

The tallow lamp cast a yellow light as Calhoon held it high. "I don't see how he could get in here."

"Me neither." Elias removed the padlock, lifted the trapdoor of the big cellar they had dug beneath the Rancho Bravo fort. "But men like that are sly as coyotes when they cravin' booze." He preceded Calhoon down the ladder.

Here, in the basement, were stacked and ordered all the reserve supplies of Rancho Bravo. In addition to food and tools, wooden boxes contained thirty new Henry rifles packed in grease; a like number of Colt revolvers. There were pigs of lead, kegs of powder set on duckboards. Just now, Elias ignored those, and went straight to a wooden case in the corner. He unlocked the top, looked inside. The six quarts of rye, to be used only as anesthetic in case of injury, were intact—all the alcohol on Rancho Bravo.

He relocked the case and they climbed out. After the trapdoor was also fastened, Elias shook his head. "Well, he didn't steal it from us. That means he got it from somebody else, out yonder, on *our* range, after he left Hill. Now, we got to make him tell us who. And then—"

He broke off as the door swung open. Pitt and Hill were there, supporting between them more wreck than man. Dunn's spongy face was greenish, his eyes red and

puffy, his beard matted with damp vomit.

"He's sober enough to talk," Hill said grimly. "A good bath in cold creek water, likely his first in months. . . . We held him under a long bit. Then applied a pair of chaps to his bare behind."

"That's your affair," Calhoon said. "All right, Barney. Where'd you get the whiskey?"

Dunn's eyes rolled. "Cap'n, it's all mixed up. I can't hardly remember."

"You'd better remember, and fast. Otherwise, Hill gets another crack at you."

"Cap'n, no, please . . ." Dunn licked his lips. "I . . . I'll try. Hill and me were at that pizen waterhole. He was workin' and I went to take a look around, so the gut-eaters couldn't come up on our blind side and catch us cold. . . ." The words came slowly, with great effort. "I went up this draw—"

"Lookin' for a place to dog it," Hill rasped.

"I— Yeah, I guess. But halfway up it, the biggest nigger I ever saw reared up outa the brush like a grizzly bear. Had a gun on me, told me not to move, asked me who I was. Told him I was a Rancho Bravo man, he asked what was that. . . . I told him and—"

But now Elias Whitton already understood, and all at once his fatigue vanished, simply went away. What replaced it was hate, hate as strong as new blood in his veins. He let out a rasping breath. "Plumb."

"Whut?" Dunn's eyes batted.

Elias stepped between Calhoon and Dunn. He felt strangely calm now, clearheaded. "Was it Plumb?" he asked softly, amazed at how controlled his own voice was.

"Yeah," Dunn said. He rubbed his face. "It was Plumb. Him and Devlin."

"Ahhh." Elias stepped aside. "Go on," he said eagerly. "Let's have it all."

"Well, this nigger, Plumb, he listened. Then he fished a jug outa the brush, tells me to light and have a drink. Well, sure, I did. We had a bunch of drinks. And he said they had an outfit not too far away. Come on with him, I could have some more, all I wanted. So I went. He led

the way, said to follow him exact, we had to cover our tracks in case of Injuns—"

"That's how come Hill lost your sign. Plumb's an expert at hidin' his trail. Go on," Elias said.

"Well, the likker'd got to me by then. We rode a hell of a ways, all twisty, I don't know where. I jest followed. Then we was in a box canyon I never seen before, and there was three wagons and about half a dozen white men. The one in charge was a big, tall, skinny feller in buckskins, with a beard down to his belt. The damndest eyes—My sister had a doll with eyes like that, back in Ohio. Blue, like they was painted on."

"Hezekiah Devlin," Elias said.

"Yeah, that's his name. And we drunk some more, a lot more, and talked a lot. He asked me all about Rancho Bravo, too."

"And you told him," Whitton said.

"I guess. I don't recollect. That's powerful booze."

"Yeah," Elias said. He was unable to be angry at Dunn anymore; all his anger was diverted in another direction. He was trembling slightly, he realized, and his fists were clenching, unclenching. "Yeah, you're way outa your depth with them two. All right, where was this place, these people, them wagons?"

"I don't know," Dunn said. "Got no idea."

"There bound to be something you remember," Elias said. "Some landmark."

"I'm sick, damn it. I can't think. And I won't be picked on by no nigger. Cap'n Calhoon . . ."

Still without anger, Elias drew his gun, thumbed back the hammer. He stepped forward and centered the muzzle between Dunn's eyes, pressing hard against Dunn's forehead.

"You are going to tell everything you can remember about that place and tell it now, or I'll shoot you dead. I'm not joking, Dunn. You get your mind together and you talk."

As he had expected, the cold steel against Dunn's flesh, leaving no doubt that Elias meant it, had a sobering effect. Dunn's muddy eyes swirled with terror, then cleared.

"Awright," he wheezed. "I can remember this. We was in the canyon, there was a spring there, and on the far rim, there was two humps of ground looked jest like a woman's titties. I know we laughed about 'em."

"Yes," Elias said. "I know where it is." He eased down the hammer of the gun, reholstered it, turned away. "Take him off," he said. "I'm through with him. I don't care what you do with him. Jest git him outa here."

"Sober him up," Calhoon commanded. "From now on, if he stays here, he's the cook's louse, not a rider, and he gets paid accordingly."

There was more, but Elias did not hear it. He had gone to the window, was staring out into the silver night. *So he is back,* he thought. *So now I can kill him after all. . . .*

"Elias," Calhoon said behind him. "What's this all about?"

Whitton turned. They were alone now. And so Elias told him. Not all of it, but enough. About Plumb and Devlin.

Hezekiah Devlin had been a mountain man in the beaver-trapping days thirty years before. He was a free trapper, working for none of the major fur companies. An expert woodsman, a fine shot, he always had a fortune in pelts to market at the Green River Rendezvous, more, it seemed, than one man alone could possibly have taken. Slowly the word got around: watch Devlin, look out for him, don't turn your back on him. Rumors spread and so did a lot of stories that weren't rumor: of other trappers, good ones, who not only didn't appear at Rendezvous but were never seen again; of a skeleton in buckskin found up Wind River; of a man apparently a long time dead from a rifle ball, the single word *Devlin* scratched with knife point on a rock. Devlin, they said, jumped others' traplines; Devlin killed for fur. Devlin, if he took a notion, would kill you for the buttons on your shirt. No one could prove a thing, but he was no longer welcome at the Rendezvous; and he had better sense than to come.

When the beaver played out, he had become a Comanchero, bringing goods to the Staked Plains to trade with

the Comanches for their Mexican loot and captives. Generally his stock in trade was whiskey, though he brought other valuables along as well.

"He'd buy up captives and sell 'em back," Elias said. "Unless they was good-lookin' women. Then he took them in his own lodge—for a while. There was one Mexican girl who was happy with the Comanches, but after Devlin had had her for a week, she stabbed herself to death. Noconah had no use for Devlin, ever, but Noconah wasn't head chief, then. By the time he was, Devlin had bought the protection of half the council with his booze; he was in too solid for Noconah to pitch him out. Well, I'll say this for him. He knows the Comanches as good as any white man can. Speaks their language, understands their ways. . . . When the war came, he disappeared. Nobody knew where." Elias bit down on his pipe. "Now he's back. On Rancho Bravo range, with his whiskey."

"And Plumb? That's what you called him?"

"He's got no other name anybody knows," Elias said. "And he is worse. There ain't nobody as bad as Plumb." He turned away again, so Calhoon could not see his face. "He's got a brain in his head, though, a big one. Like me, he was a slave before the war, belonged to the owner of a wagon yard in St. Louis. A Northern family bound west for Oregon traded with that man, and Plumb got next to 'em. They were dead set against slavery and kind-hearted people and they had some money. Plumb give them a big sad story about how much abuse he had to take, all the whippin's and tortures his master put him through. He could talk a coon down out of a tree, Plumb could, and they fell for it, took pity on him, bought him free, and took him on west with 'em, like a member of the family."

Elias was surprised at how steady his voice was. "All he really wanted was their money. He messed up the wagon so it broke down and they had to fall behind. When the wagonmaster sent back for 'em, they found the old man and his son with their heads bashed in, the daughter raped and her and her mama with their throats cut, and the money box gone. Plumb gone, too, on their best horse."

Calhoon made a sound in his throat.

"But there is worse to come," Elias said.

Plumb had surfaced again in Sonora, Mexico, when the state government offered a bounty on Apache scalps. And he had brought in scalps, all right, in wholesale batches. Some of them may even have been those of Apaches. Most of them he had gotten, though, by ingratiating himself with friendly Indians—or the inhabitants of isolated little Mexican villages. Then Plumb would give a feast, everybody invited, men, women, children: plenty of meat and lots of *pinole*, the corn meal mush that was a staple of the diet in that region. The *pinole* was heavily laced with strychnine.

"He'd take whole villages at a time," Elias said. "You ever watched a animal die of strychnine poisonin', Loosh? It takes a long time, hurts so bad the critter will bite its ownself in its pain. Men, women, little kids . . . and then he'd take their hair."

"Christ," Calhoon said.

"Finally they run him out of Mexico. Then he throwed in with Devlin in the Comanche trade. And . . ." Again he did not want Calhoon to see his eyes; he turned his head. "In the old days, I had run-ins with both of 'em. They know who I am all right, and they hate my guts, you can count on that. When the war started, they disappeared. I'd hoped they was gone for good. But, no. They out there on Rancho Bravo range now, with wagon loads of whiskey. Well, we got to take it, no time to waste. Loosh, you better git the men set to ride again."

Calhoon grimaced. " 'Lias, they're dead beat. You heard Dunn. Devlin, Plumb, you say they're good fighting men. And they've got six other guns with 'em, at least. We can't go up against a crowd like that, in the dark, dead tired. We'll lose men, bound to."

"No," Elias said. "We work this right, we will lose no men, not a single one will git a scratch. But that's if we move fast. We hang around until too late, yeah, we have one hell of a fight. That why we got to ride tonight; we got to be in place by daybreak."

"In place where?"

Elias smiled without any mirth. He had smelled it, as soon as Dunn had unreeled his story: a warning taint as strong as the reek of buried jaws of rusty steel in the nostrils of a trap-shy wolf.

"Where neither Plumb nor Devlin expect us," he said. "At their wagons."

"But I just said, their men—"

"Their men won't be there if we git a hustle on. They be somewhere else, waitin' for us to ride into a bushwhack."

Calhoon stared at him. "Where?"

"Think about it," Elias said. "Men like Plumb and Devlin would cut their own grandmother's throat for a dirty dollar. On our range with whiskey, and know we won't stand for that. But they don't kill Dunn. They git him drunk and turn him loose."

He could almost hear Calhoon's mind work, fast, smoothly, like the action of a well-oiled gun. Then Loosh's face broke into a frosty grin that matched his own. "Yeah," he said. "You're right."

"I better be," Elias said. "Now, let's get the men and an extra fresh horse for each. We got a lot of ground to cover before the sun comes up."

Chapter Four

LYING IN THE darkness on the canyon rim, he could feel his heart hammering in his chest. Already, he thought, there was a hint of light in the east. Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour; no more than that.

He shifted weight without a sound, hands tightening

on his rifle. Below, in the narrow canyon, he could see in the pooled blackness only the three lighter areas that were the tarps of the parked wagons; a red glow that was the coals of a banked fire. *Plumb,* he thought. *I hope he got sense enough to see we got him cold. I hope he don't fight back and make me kill him. Not with a rifle, anyhow. . . .* Again, the hatred rose in him, thick, stifling, almost enough to unman him. To force it down, he cast a glance at Roland, the Rancho Bravo man lying in a clump of boulders not far away. A good man, steady, motionless as a chuckawalla on a rock.

The others, too, out there around the canyon rim, where, soundlessly, he had placed them in the darkness with, surely, no more than a half hour to spare. Once it had been explained to them by Calhoon, there had been no more grumbling; they were, after all, Rancho Bravo men, and what the brand demanded of them, they would do.

So, led by him, Elias Whitton, they had ridden hard, each man leading a spare horse. When the first mounts gave out, they changed to the fresher ones with hardly a minute's loss of time. Then they were in the broken country, a great tableland chopped into nightmare shapes by wind and sometimes water, a jumble and labyrinth of buttes and draws and washes. Both sets of horses were dead beat by then, for they'd had to swing a wide arc.

They'd left the mounts in a draw with one man to guard them, gone forward on foot, without spurs or anything in their pockets to clink or jingle, like ghosts in the predawn murk, Elias in the lead. He'd halted them, made a scout on his own, and when he'd returned, his own fatigue was gone. He had been right. "Only three of 'em," he whispered. "An' all three sound asleep. We got 'em cold if we don't tip our hand."

He had taken his position between the two humps of ground that indeed looked roughly like a woman's breasts. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Elias took out his pipe, chewed its stem.

It hadn't taken Loosh Calhoon long to figure it out.

"The Waterhole," he'd said. "That poisoned waterhole Hill shoveled out."

"That's right. They set a trap there, for Rancho Bravo; and they used Barney Dunn as bait." He'd continued tersely as they moved out to get the men. "Plumb and Devlin are bound for the Comanche camp to sell their booze. Bad as Noconah hates it, he can't stop 'em; they got powerful protection among the chiefs that are likker-heads. But then they run into Dunn, out there where there ain't supposed to be no Texas cowhands. Minute Plumb hears first thing about Rancho Bravo, his mind starts to work. Devlin's jest as fast. Look what they stumbled onto. Fifteen hundred head of cattle, a headquarters already built—and a wagon train due back from Colorado with gold and trade goods. They play their cards right, they can have all of that, in a hurry. All they got to do is take us—if they can. Then Rancho Bravo theirs—and who to tell them no? Gannon and the others be sittin' ducks when they come in. And—"

"Noconah. Would he stand for it?"

"What good would it do him to raise hell if we already dead, especially me? By the time Plumb and Devlin throw a big feast for the whole tribe, pour all the booze in 'em they can drink, Noconah froze out. Plumb and Devlin take over our concession, make it ranch and tradin' post both; they got everything we built up and wiped out any competition for trade. All they got to do is take what Rancho Bravo men are here, and be damned sure they git me along with 'em."

"The bastards," Calhoon said.

"Well, if I figure right, we'll wet their powder good. They sent Dunn back because they knowed the minute I heard about 'em, I'd have Rancho Bravo hotfoot after 'em, loaded for bear. They got Dunn so drunk, confused, they sure he can't lead us direct to them wagons. There ain't but one place he *can* take us—that poison waterhole. They figure we'll start from there and backtrack. And they'll hustle to have their men there, waitin', by first daylight." Again that cold grin. "But they made one mistake. Drunk as he was, them two hills stuck in Dunn's

horny mind. And that's tip-off enough, because I know that canyon. I know there is a spring there and they got to have it to water their stock. And I know that's where we'll find Plumb and Devlin, with their men miles away at the other place."

Calhoon looked at him. "You think they'll both be there?"

"They'll both be there," Elias said. "They worked together too long, know each other too damned well. One ain't goin' off and leave the other with his goods. They'll send their men out and stay with their outfit to watch it and each other."

"Well, we'll give 'em something to watch, all right," Calhoon said grimly.

A long gamble, but the right one. Now Elias took the pipe from his mouth, raised his eyes. His pulses quickened: the sun was coming up.

It was as if the eastern sky exploded; darkness one moment, a burst of light the next, glinting off raw rock in the canyon walls, revealing below the three parked wagons, the men in bedrolls near them. Then Elias Whitton drew in breath and held it. Plumb threw off his blankets, stood up.

There was no mistaking that giant form, enormous in the shoulders, slender in the hips, thick arms and thighs bulging the seams of the Charro garb of a Mexican grandee that he wore: black jacket, skin-tight black pants flaring over boots, all rich with soiled gold braid. As Elias watched, Plumb fished his gun belt from the horn of the saddle he'd used as pillow, cinched it on, picked up his rifle. Then he turned slowly in a circle, carefully scanning the rim.

Elias froze, hoping none of the others would betray their presence by any least sign: Plumb had the vision of a circling eagle. Seconds seemed endless as Plumb looked this way and that, and then Elias breathed again as the big man relaxed, went to the fire, stirred its coals with his boot toe, then dropped a few dry ocotillo canes on the embers.

Now the others were getting up: Devlin and a third man, a Mexican, obviously teamster and flunky. Devlin was tall, but not so tall as Plumb, as lanky and loose-jointed as a skeleton in buckskin, his shoulders hunched by advancing age. Like Plumb, he first, with the frontiersman's instinct, put on his weapon harness and took up his Henry rifle. And, like Plumb, he scanned the rimrock, but more briefly; his eyes were not as keen as Plumb's. Wind fluttering his waist-length beard, he spoke to the Mexican, who got down on hands and knees and blew at the smoldering fire.

And so the three of them were all together there, around the coals, and Elias thought: *Now.*

"Plumb!" His shout echoed and re-echoed in the canyon. "Devlin!"

Both men jumped, whirled, guns coming up.

"Elias Whitton talkin'! You're surrounded. Rancho Bravo men all around this rim, got the dead drop. Put down them guns and raise your hands. One bad move, you're dead as hell!"

Plumb and Devlin did not move, but their eyes raked the rocks above.

Elias grinned, fired into the bed of coals. At the same moment, somebody from the other rim pumped two shots that ripped up dust at Devlin's feet. Devlin squawked and dropped his rifle. Plumb's face twisted. Lithely he jumped aside, crouching, head turning, gun up. Elias aimed and fired again.

The heavy slug, smashing the receiver of Plumb's rifle, jerked it from his hands. Plumb swore, spitting words Whitton could not hear, and stared at his spread fingers, blood dripping from the right hand where the trigger guard had ripped it. Then he, too, lifted hands above his head.

"Who's in those wagons?" Elias shouted.

"Nobody!" Devlin's voice was a hoarse croak, like a raven's caw. "They empty—"

"Loosh! You men! Rake 'em!"

The dawn exploded with the sound of many guns; the tarps whipped as rifle fire poured into them. A man

screamed; Elias saw him appear at the tailgate, rifle in hand, then jerk as a bullet hit him. Limply he pitched over the tailboard, landed unmoving in the dust. Calhoon yelled: "Cease firing." Then there was silence, save for the neighing and braying of frightened horses and mules plunging on a picket line.

"Throw away them handguns!" Elias yelled. This time Plumb and Devlin obeyed quickly, carefully. "Cover me, Roland," Elias said. "I'm goin' down."

Plumb and Devlin watched him come, and on the far rim Calhoon appeared and, followed by Pitt and one other man, skittered down the canyon wall.

"Elias," Hezekiah Devlin said, croaking voice unctuous with false friendship, as if Whitton were his long-lost comrade. "Good to see you again."

Elias spared him only a glance; he was not so much worried about Devlin. Plumb was the one that had to be watched every minute. He had not taken his eyes off Plumb for one instant as he had descended the slope of the canyon, crossed its floor, rifle lined, to confront the men. "Devlin," he said tersely. Then, "Hello, Plumb."

Plumb did not answer. His skin was as black as Whitton's, but his face could have been an Indian's: high, sharp cheekbones, beaked nose, thin lips. His eyes, half-hooded by their lids, flickered to Whitton's rifle, then to Whitton's face, but they betrayed no fear. It had, Whitton thought, been left out of Plumb, along with all other human feelings.

Then Calhoon came up, while Pitt and Freeman, the other man, searched the wagons with drawn revolvers. "Gentlemen," Elias said thinly, "meet Captain Lucius Calhoon, my partner in Rancho Bravo."

Towering over both of them, Plumb curled his lips. "High cotton, 'Lias. Partnerin' with a white *cap'n.*"

"Never mind that, now," Elias said. Yes, his voice was holding, it was steady. "I got news to tell you, Plumb."

"News?"

"Woman Like A Willow. My wife. She's dead."

Something swirled then, finally, in the depths of Plumb's

hooded eyes. Maybe, Elias thought with a surge of triumph, fear at last.

"What's that to me?" Plumb asked tonelessly.

"Well, she told me," Elias said. "She told me about that night in the brush down there on the North Fork of the Red. How she went to git some water, and you stepped out and grabbed her, tried to drag her in the bushes." His hands tightened on the gun; Plumb stared down at its barrel. Yes, he thought, with great satisfaction. Fear. "Just before she died, she told me, Plumb."

"I don't know what you talkin' about."

"You know. She fought you, got away, somehow. And she didn't tell me then, because she knew I'd come after you and she was scared I couldn't handle you. She was afraid you'd kill me. So she stayed hushed until just before . . . just before she died, havin' the baby. And, of course, you long gone by then."

"Elias," Calhoon said. "What?"

"It's this," Elias said; his own voice sounded strange, as if it came from someone else. "He had eyes for my wife, even when she big with child; that make no difference to such an animal. He lay for her in the dark, try to rape her, but she git loose. Afraid to tell me, trying to protect me, and she think no harm done. She find out later she wrong. Them big arms—" he looked at the bulging muscles in the tight jacket "—around her belly, crushin'. And he and Devlin had already left for parts unknown before things went wrong inside of her. Only at the last did she tell me, when she in fever, knowing she was dyin', and the baby already dead, dead long enough inside her to poison her. . . . And nothin' no medicine man or old women could do for her. . . . She told me then while I sat by her and watched her die." He drew in a long breath that made his chest swell. "That's the news, Plumb. Willow Woman dead. And the baby, too, and you the one that killed 'em."

Plumb said nothing, but there was a tinge of ash in his face now.

"I looked for you," Elias went on. "God knows, I looked everywhere for you, but you'd clean vanished, you

and Devlin. And then some Kiowas told me they'd heard the Mescaleros got the both of you. And I gave up then and headed east. But . . . the Kiowas was wrong, it seems. Here you are. At long last."

"Elias," Calhoon began again.

"Hush, Loosh," Elias said.

After a moment, Plumb, still staring at the gun barrel, laughed shortly and with defiance. "All right," he said. "Go ahead and gutshoot me and git it over with."

And it would have been easy, so easy: two fast rounds, low down, one in the groin, the next in the belly, and . . . He thought of Woman Like A Willow dying in agony and of all he had lost and his finger tightened on the trigger. He was aware of Calhoon's eyes on him, and those pale, painted blue ones of Devlin's, and— Plumb would scream. Plumb would yell for a long time. No man, crotch-shot and blasted in the belly could help that and maybe, in the Shadow Land, Willow Woman would hear and— No, that was not a thing she would have liked to hear. When captives were tortured, she had hidden in the lodge, her head beneath the robes. But she had screamed, too, at the end, and Plumb had it coming, godamn him, he had it—

With a quick gesture Elias held out the rifle. "Take this, Loosh," he snapped.

Plumb grinned, but his face was still ash-colored. "I knowed you couldn't do it. Not your style."

"No," Elias said and uncinched the gun belt and laid it aside, never taking eyes off Plumb. "No, I got to do it with my hands; I got to feel my hands on you."

" 'Lias!" The word exploded from Calhoon. "Don't be a fool!" His eyes raked up Plumb's body, towering over Whitton by a foot, all hard bone and muscle.

Plumb's eyes gleamed. "Why," he said, "if you come after me with your hands, I'll wring your neck like a chicken."

"My worry," Elias said. "Step over yonder in the clear."

"And if I whup you, white boss blows a hole in me, that the way it is?"

"Nobody blows a hole in you without it's me," Elias said. He knew Plumb, his strength and power, and it did

not matter; he felt something within himself not even Plumb could stand against. "Jest my two hands," he said.

"Ahhh—" A kind of sigh, and Plumb stepped well clear of the fire, peeling off his jacket. The sun was high, now, and it glinted off a torso black as locomotive iron, all rippling muscle. Elias peeled off his own shirt and vest. Sweaty flesh was harder to grip than cloth; he would yield Plumb no advantage.

" 'Lias," Calhoon said, his voice pleading now.

"Leave me be, Loosh," Elias said, and he went for Plumb, charged straight in, his own body shorter, thick, just as muscular, his big head down. He was going to take some punishment, but that did not matter. He could not wait; he wanted Plumb. He did not even clench his fists. When he was in range of Plumb's hands, Plumb tried to club him and Elias's open hand came up, flashing, caught the blow, absorbed, diverted it. Then he was under Plumb's guard and felt a terrific jolt as Plumb's left hand clubbed him in the small of the back. But his own head went in, butting, slamming into the banded muscles of Plumb's gut, and Plumb rocked back, and then Elias had him around the waist. Plumb's knee came up, hard, and Elias felt it smash his ribs a glancing blow. But he, who could bring down a stallion, lifted, jerked, and Plumb's feet left the ground. Elias twisted Plumb's body, dropped it, even as Plumb chopped him in the back and clubbed his skull; he felt the shock of blows but no pain. When Plumb landed, he was off balance, flailing to regain it. Then Elias had a chance at his face. That was what he wanted. With Plumb wide open, he hit Plumb with a right that smashed his nose; he felt the cartilage crunch beneath his knuckles, the hot blood course across his hand. Plumb grunted, staggering, blinded by the pain; a man's eyes watered badly when he took a blow like that. Elias chopped him in the mouth and felt lips split against Plumb's teeth. Then Plumb snorted blood and got his balance, lashing out blindly.

The blow caught Elias on the cheekbone, whipped his head around. Plumb hit him in the chest and his heart seemed to stop. The force of it picked him up, threw him

flat on his shoulders in the sand. Blue sky, glaring sun; he caught flashes of color and the earth seemed to tilt beneath him. Then Plumb blocked out the sun, a black mass, smeared with scarlet, coming at him, hands clawed, thumbs splayed and gouging at Whitton's eyes. As Plumb's two hundred pounds landed on him with jarring force, Whitton turned his head quickly. Plumb's left thumb raked his cheek. Elias's teeth fastened in the flesh of the right one and bit it to the bone. Plumb grunted, and Elias got his own hand up, clawed over Plumb's face, and his fingers dug into Plumb's eyes, and Plumb rolled aside, panting, and both were coming up, then. Plumb shook his head, nose still spouting blood, right hand pouring it, and roared incoherently. Elias, gasping for breath, stood his ground. Still, he felt no pain, no fear, only a wild, savage joy, a sense of being unbeatable, impervious, as if he were of steel, not flesh and blood. He took a left on his shoulder and a right that rocked him but made Plumb roar again with the pain jarring his ripped thumb. Then he had his chance and he hit that nose again and then Plumb's throat, squarely under his chin. Plumb gagged and made a strangling sound, wind choked off and blood running down his throat, and staggered back. Elias came in, now, hands like pistons. Though he was smaller, his fists were as big as Plumb's, his arms as powerful, and he drove home a blow to Plumb's chest, another to the belly, felt blood spray him, and Plumb's foul breath, and then again and again, right, left, chopping in Plumb's face, and Plumb could not stop him now. Plumb had no wind, could not breathe. His blows still hurt, jarred, but lacked their lethal steam. Then another chop and another, and Plumb staggered back, hands dropping for an instant, and Elias bored in mercilessly and rocked Plumb's head around, and Plumb swayed and tried again to fight, but it was too late. Elias knew he'd broken a knuckle, maybe two, in his left hand; he could not feel it. He hit Plumb again and again in the face, having it all his way now, and Plumb's head whipped back and forth and Plumb's knees were sagging, and Plumb's hands had dropped again.

"Jesus," Devlin croaked.

Willow Woman dying; the smell of rot in the teepee, her hand closing on mine, her face streaming sweat, but her hand was cold. . . . He hit Plumb and then again and then again, and Plumb was down on hands and knees, now, head drooping, and Elias stepped back, kicked up, hard, and the boot toe caught Plumb under the chin. There was a click as Plumb's teeth came together, and then, like some giant animal dying, he groaned and flopped over on his side, lay still. Elias drew back his boot, aimed it at Plumb's head. *Her hand had been so cold. . . .*

He was jerked off balance. The kick missed.

"Elias!" Calhoon rasped.

Elias stared into the pale face, the shocked gray eyes. "Let me go, white man," he hissed.

Calhoon released him. "All right," he whispered. "You want to do it that way . . ."

"I—" The earth seemed to tilt, the sky to ripple. Then Elias was back inside himself. He shivered like a man awakening from a nightmare, and then he stared with awe at what he had made of Plumb. It lay there, a black hulk smeared with dust and blood, making bubbling sounds as it struggled for breath.

And then it was over; there was no desire to hurt Plumb any more. There was, in fact, nothing left inside Elias Whitton. He felt empty, drained, purged. And then, sick, very sick. He turned away, gagged up greenish phlegm. He spat it out and sat down hard, in the dust, aware now of pain, in his hands, his face, all through his torso. Somebody held a canteen to his mouth; the water was hot and metallic-tainted. It was the best thing he had ever tasted.

He sat there panting, no longer capable of taking part in anything going on around him. Calhoon brought him rifle and pistol, looking at him with a kind of awe, mopped his face down with water. From what seemed a long way off, he heard Pitt say, "What about the booze, Captain? Them wagons jammed with it, barrels and barrels . . ."

"Dump 'em," Calhoon said. Devlin squawked, and Calhoon's voice, ice cold, cut him off: "This is Rancho Bravo

range. No whiskey allowed on it, by agreement with Noconah. Be quiet, Devlin; we still got other matters to settle. You'll be lucky if you aren't hanging from a wagon tongue before this is over. There's still the matter of the rest of your men."

And then there was the sound of axes chopping and a rank smell filled the canyon and somebody, maybe Hill, said, "Lord, God, look a there, in the bottom of the barrel. What is that mess?"

Pitt said, "Why you think they call it *snakehead* whiskey? Bad as I want a shot, I'd as soon drink coal oil mixed with cow pee as that stuff. They put anything in it to give it bite."

After a while, Elias could stand up and don his shirt. That was more than Plumb could do; he was still out cold, breath a painful rasping through what had once been a handsome nose. *It'll be flat as mine from now on,* Elias thought. He knew that Loosh was doing something wrong, there was something he had to tell Loosh. But he kept thinking of Willow Woman. Maybe she would rest easier now and maybe not. She was not like most Comanche women; she lacked that streak of cruelty that made the women, sometimes, worse than the men. She had not liked killing; she had been in love with life. Then he knew what Loosh was doing wrong, and what he had to tell him, but something held him back. Still, it would be wise to see Calhoon's threat carried out: the world would be a better place and Rancho Bravo safer if Plumb and Devlin both were hanged from the wagon tongues.

But Loosh was talking about letting them go. "If your men surrender when they come in, lay down their arms without a fight, you and Plumb can take your wagons and go back where you came from. But you'd better never let us catch you on Rancho Bravo land again."

"Loosh," Elias said, then broke off. If she had been watching, she had seen enough. Let it ride.

"Cap'n, I swear to you, there'll be no trouble. When they come in, they'll lay down their guns."

"They had better," Calhoon said. "What was that, Elias?"

"Nothing," Whitton said. "Only you had better tie Plumb's hands and feet if you aim to let him live. Otherwise, he wake up fighting."

After a while, his head was clearer. It was hot in the wagon. He sat beside Plumb, with his Colt in his hand. Plumb finally awakened, looked at him wordlessly, eyes white and staring. He made a snarling, bubbling sound. Elias held the gun against his face. "We are waitin' for your men to come in. If you make one outcry, I'll pull this trigger." Plumb closed his eyes and neither moved nor spoke again.

They came late in the afternoon, tired of their fruitless vigil at the waterhole. Completely unsuspecting, they rode into the canyon, six of them, the kind of hard cases Devlin would have had no trouble rounding up in Santa Fe. When they found they were covered from the rim and from within the wagons, there were no heroes among them. They allowed themselves to be disarmed.

Then it was over. "Plumb," Elias said, crouching beside the battered form in the wagon.

Plumb's eyes were puffy slits in the battered mask of his face, as his lids peeled back.

"You got off lucky this time," Elias said. "But now I am gonna tell you this. Don't ever come around me or Rancho Bravo again. Next time, I will use a knife and take you apart piece by piece, and you know which piece I'll begin with."

Plumb closed his eyes, spoke no word. Elias left the wagon. "Well, you saved him this time," he said aloud, although there was no one around him at the moment. "I wouldn't take his life in your name. You rest easy."

Calhoon and Pitt double-checked: there was not a gun left in the possession of Devlin's outfit as the wagons, empty save for Plumb and a few supplies, rolled westward, back the way they had come.

"God help 'em if they bump into Mescaleros," Pitt said.

Elias left unvoiced the thought that if they did, it would solve a lot of future problems for Rancho Bravo. The mistake they had made today would cost them in the future. But there was no more hatred in him; that part of

it was done with. Now he must think about the guns to be delivered to Comanche Springs. Time was running out. Twenty-four hours more; he would give himself that much time to rest and hope that in that interval the Colorado train arrived. If it did not, there was only one way out, and that was something he dared not think about until he had to. He tried to make his mind a blank. For today, he'd had enough.

Chapter Five

THE BIG, HIGH-SIDED wagons pulled by teams of oxen rolled up before the house at dawn, Henry Gannon, red-headed, freckle-faced, and Philip Killraine, a bantam rooster of a man with a sharp-pointed cavalry mustache, riding in the lead, broad grins of triumph on their faces. "Guns," said Gannon, as Whitton let out a whoop of joy and relief. "We've brought a million of 'em. All these wagons are full of guns." Elias seized his hand and shook it. Everything was fine, now, everything was wonderful.

Aching in every muscle, Whitton awoke in the darkness of the tepee, lay motionless in his buffalo robes as the dream faded and reality crowded in. It was bitter to lose that glorious release from tension, to feel the crushing weight of his responsibility descend on him again inexorably. Then, realizing suddenly how dark and still it was, save for the distant yapping of a coyote, he sprang out of bed, grimacing as his battered body shrieked in protest. Belting on his gun, drawing on his boots, he slipped through the entrance way. The other lodges, in which the Rancho Bravo outfit slept, were white cones in the star-

light. Whitton glanced at the sky, swore softly. Midnight. He had slept for a full twelve hours.

He turned toward the house, but, of course, there were no wagons there. But a light burned inside the building, spilling a faint yellow glare through the window.

Soundless as a cat, Elias crossed the yard, peered in. Calhoon sat at the split-log table, face buried in his good hand, shoulders slumped. Whitton's mouth thinned. At least *he* only had the guns to worry about; poor Loosh, though he tried to hide it, was frantic with fear for his wife's safety. After all, he and Evelyn had shared only a few days in San Antonio after their marriage before she had gone on to Denver and Calhoon had rejoined the herd as it moved west.

Whitton turned away. It was his fault that Loosh was here instead of with his wife in Colorado; his fault for being black. Save for that accident of skin color, he could have ramrodded this outfit single-handed. But, no: one of the white partners had had to stay, because no black man could handle those Texas riders by himself. And, of course, Gannon had been needed with the herd, Killraine to sell it at the market, so the obligation had fallen on Calhoon, who never complained.

And so maybe he, Elias, had no right to, either. It was something he usually forced himself to ignore—that sense of impotence, the constant humiliation Calhoon's very presence implied. But other times, and this was one of them, resentment rode him, and its spurs were sharp. There were times when he could not help it—the doubt that filled him about the whole idea of Rancho Bravo. Why should he have risked his life, and, even more precious, his reputation among the People, the Comanches, to make rich men who would not drink from the same cup or obey his orders even when it was he who helped pay their wages? Then, fiercely, he shook his head. *No, you got to watch that,* he thought. *Too much of that kind of thinking turn you sour, like Plumb went sour. Besides, it ain't for them you do it, nor for yourself either. It for the People. In the long run, Rancho Bravo a better hope for them than even for Calhoon or the others. When the*

Army comes west again, when somebody open the throttle on that big, smashin' engine—

Calming, he took out his pipe, loaded, lit it, savored the rich smoke. *And so,* he thought, *you got to do what you got to do. But how you goin' to make Loosh see it? How you goin' to make any of 'em see it?*

Then he thought, *Well, they got to take my word for it. Black or not, they got to listen to me and understand. And it begin with Loosh. So I might as well brace him now and git it over with.*

When Elias entered, Calhoon jerked erect and looked around. "Oh, it's you."

"Me. I sho did sleep." He got coffee from the fireplace, took a long, steaming swallow. "No wagons," he said. "And no word?"

"I'd have waked you if there had been."

Elias nodded, drank more coffee.

"Come daybreak," Loosh went on, "I'm sending Hill and Roland north, to Fort Sumner, and if there's no word there, on to Colorado. I can't—" His voice broke slightly. "I can't take this waitin' any longer."

"Sho. We shoulda done it sooner, only we needed every hand we had, and we was hopin'. Well, that don't matter now." Elias drained the cup and set it down. "It take two weeks for them to git back here with any word. And— We got to have some guns at Comanche Springs three days from now."

Calhoon raised his head, stared at him with angry eyes. "God damn it, we've got no guns!"

"We've got guns," Elias said. "Not the three hundred we promised 'em. But, with luck, maybe enough to keep 'em quiet and buy some time." Taking out his key, he went to the cellar trapdoor, unlocked and raised it. "There," he said.

Calhoon just looked at him. Then he said, harshly, "No!"

"Loosh, there ain't no choice." Elias pointed. "There's thirty Henry repeaters down there and as many revolvers and a few shotguns. And plenty of powder and balls and

cartridges. There's enough repeatin' arms there, divided out among the three bands, to make sure they kill plenty buffalo. And that's the main thing they interested in right now—killin' buffalo."

"No!" Calhoon, face grim, shook his head. "No, I won't permit it!"

"Loosh—"

"Elias, don't be a fool. Those guns, that ammo, down there—that's the only reserve Rancho Bravo's got. If everything goes to hell and your Comanches come at us, we'll need every weapon, every dram of powder, every grain of lead!" He hit the table with his fist. "Those guns are the only edge we've got! I'll not gamble with the lives of all our men by giving them away just when we need 'em most! And that's final!"

"Is it?" Whitton asked. "Who says so?"

"I do! I'm responsible for the defense of Rancho Bravo and it's my authority!"

"And I'm responsible for handlin' the Indians so you won't have to defend it. Your authority don't start 'til mine's run out!" Whitton knew Calhoon was edgy, irrational with fear for his wife, but even making allowances, his own temper began to slip. "And I say we've come down to where that's the only hope we've got. Those guns won't satisfy the Injuns, but they're somethin' I can use to prove we meant what we said, that we keep our bargains. And when I tell 'em they're our own reserve, all we got except what we carry, they'll have to believe—"

"You'll tell 'em no such thing!" Calhoon roared. "Tell 'em we're defenseless, *invite* them in to rub us out, bastards like that Black Bull Man? No! No, it's out of the question." He subsided, turned his back on Whitton.

"Loosh," Elias said.

Calhoon slowly faced him.

"It's got to be this way. In Comanche hands, those guns may keep the peace. They stay in ours, they won't amount to spit in a rainstorm when the Injuns come, which they surely will. You think, even with those guns, that ammo, fourteen men can stand off the whole northern division

of the Comanche tribe, and maybe the Kiowas thrown in? Don't be a fool!"

Calhoon's face flamed. "Don't call me a fool, you—" He broke off before he said *nigger*, but the word seemed nevertheless to ring in the room. Then Loosh's manner changed. "I'm sorry, Elias. I've been thinking about Evelyn, Henry, Phil, all the rest, wondering where in hell, what the devil—" He rubbed his face. "Maybe we should put it to the men. You're a partner, I'm a partner, we think differently. It's their lives in the balance. Let them decide."

"No," Elias said. "We're partners all right, but you're white and I'm a . . . nigger. You know which one they'll listen to. And this is too important to let what color my skin is swing the balance. *We* got to decide—you and me."

"Well, I've decided," Calhoon said. "Those guns mean maybe going under right away or standing off an attack until help comes."

Elias grinned without humor. "What help?"

Calhoon stared at him.

"Help from Sumner? You think the Army gonna haul out and leave the whole Navajo tribe they're guardin' up at Bosque Redondo to take on the Comanches? And where else is there any help? We could hold out for a while, sho, but for years? That how you want to spend your life? Shut up in here shootin' at Comanches?"

"But when Gannon and the others come—" Then Calhoon broke off and comprehension mixed with horror crossed his face.

"That's right," Elias said. "When they come. When they come, they walk right into a hornet's nest. Unawares, they be crossin' miles of Comanche territory not even knowin' the Comanches are at war against us. And what do you think will happen to them then? And—" he bored in mercilessly "—Evelyn. Not only Henry and his wife and Phil and our riders, but . . . Is that how you want her to wind up? A squaw in maybe Black Bull's lodge because I couldn't bring any guns at all to Comanche Springs before our deadline?"

For a long moment, Calhoon was silent. Then, hope-

lessly, he said, "God, I don't know what to do."

"There ain't but one thing you can do. Trust me."

Before Calhoon could answer, he went on, choosing his words carefully. "I know. You want to. But it's there, and you can't help it, none of you can. It's in the back of your mind all the time: We're at a nigger's mercy, we got to trust a nigger. And not only a nigger, but a Comanche, too, and maybe the rest of you git scalped, but he manage to come out safe on the other side. Maybe when the showdown come, he fight against us to save his own hair."

Calhoon's face was paper-white. "No, you know I don't think that. I never would."

"You have, you will, you can't help it, and neither can the rest. But that ain't my concern right now. My concern is savin' Rancho Bravo and the lives on it, includin' Evelyn Calhoon's."

He turned away, remembering that unvoiced word Calhoon had nearly flung, wondering why he bothered. He could be at Comanche Springs in three days and leave Elias Whitton, Rancho Bravo man, behind like a rattler's discarded skin. Could go back to being what he really was, Dark Rider, of the Quahadis, and, because his wife had been of Noconah's band, of the Noconahs. He could find another woman, and when the white soldiers came—Well, he had fought them once, as a Comanche, against Kit Carson at Adobe Walls. He could fight them again, and if he went down fighting whites, at least he went down as a warrior.

"All right," Calhoon said. "Whatever you think best."

Elias turned. The expression on Calhoon's face wiped out the bitterness in a single stroke, and that crushing weight came off of him.

Calhoon was smiling faintly, his eyes meeting Whitton's directly. "You say I don't trust you. Well, I put my life in your hands; and my wife's. That's all I can do or say. If you think this is right, I'll go along."

"Loosh," Elias whispered.

"I'll explain it to the men," Calhoon said. "They won't

like it, but I can make them accept it. When do you want to leave?"

Elias sat down suddenly on a split-log bench. He fumbled with his pipe. "Come daybreak. I got to pull out soonest. It a long way from here to Comanche Springs. With some pack horses, I'll have to ride hard to meet their deadline."

Calhoon nodded. "I'll roust out the men and have everything ready when the sun comes up. Leave it to me and you get some sleep." Once again all business, he went out.

As he closed the door behind him, Elias said, softly, "Damn . . ." All right, he thought. It would not be easy; it would use up the last scrap of goodwill he had with the tribe, call for every ounce of courage and diplomacy he could muster, every bit of his understanding of the Comanche mind. But he would do it somehow. And not just for the sake of the Comanches. He was, he realized suddenly, a Rancho Bravo man himself, black or not, and other Rancho Bravo men trusted him, depended on him; and maybe, just maybe, belonging to Rancho Bravo was, after all, as great a thing as being a Comanche. . . .

Chapter Six

HE LEVERED ANOTHER shell into the Henry, made sure its barrel was firmly settled in the forked stick placed deeply in the ground. He brought the front sight, finely notched in the rear one, to bear just behind the left foreleg of a young fat cow; and then he pulled the trigger. The bullet went home and split her heart; the buffalo dropped to her knees without a sound, then fell over on

her flank. Despite the thunder of the gun, the rest of the grazing herd out there on the flat took no alarm, but went on feeding.

Sprawled beside Elias in the grass on the rise, Quanah made a breathy sound of awe. "That's sixteen!" he whispered. "Sixteen kills already and the sun's hardly moved! Big medicine, Dark Rider!"

Elias grinned. "It's not medicine or magic, just the Texas way of killing buffalo. Now, you try it while I reload. But remember, keep a fine bead and aim for the heart. The thing is not to wound one so it runs around, bellowing and bleeding; you've got to drop them clean. You do, the rest pay no attention. You can go on shooting until your gun barrel's too hot to hold."

He squirmed away to make room for Quanah at the forked stick, slid down the reverse slope of the rise of ground, sat up to cram new rounds in the Henry. As he did, his eyes met those of Black Bull Man, the other observer appointed by the tribe. "Well," he asked in English, bitingly, "you believe me now?"

Black Bull, squatting, sun glinting on his lean red body, bit his lower lip. A frown distorted his painted face. "It seems to work, all right. But it's an old woman's way of killin' meat. Hidin' in the grass, shootin' 'em down the way I've seen Jabez Dale slaughter a cow in a pen. The Comanche way—"

"—is to run 'em, yeah. Hit a herd, every man for himself, move in, pick a critter, bring it down, go after another." Elias nodded, shoving cartridges in the loading tube at the muzzle end. "And I'll grant you, it's a lot more fun. But it wastes ammunition, horses, men. This way gits the meat. And that's what I promised, ain't it? Meat, plenty meat, on this hunt, and lots of robes."

Black Bull was silent, sullen. Behind them, Quanah's rifle roared, and Quanah grunted with satisfaction. Another of the four hundred or so buffalo in that bunch out there was down. *Seventeen,* Elias thought. *In a half hour. With seventeen shots.* . . . He went on reloading, taking pleasure in Black Bull Man's confusion, in his own sense of triumph, in a lot of other things as well: the sun's heat

on his nearly naked body, the sense of being at home again in the Big Open, the hunter's excitement. Calhoon, he thought, would recognize nothing about him now save the color of his skin; otherwise, he was wholly Quahadi Comanche, face painted, body naked except for loin wrapping, moccasins, and his weapons-harness, a couple of eagle feathers tied in his short, curly hair. The temptation to go on needling Black Bull was strong, but he reminded himself that it must be resisted. He did not want to deepen the Quahadi sub-chief's enmity; if possible, he must defuse it.

"Anyhow," he continued, voice reasonable, "it's not a way of hunting the People could have known about. Even the *Tejanos* and the other whites didn't start using it until they got the right guns to make it work. Until the Sharps and these Henrys came along, there wasn't no way except to ride in among 'em and shoot 'em at close range. But now—" He patted the gun. "Sixteen shots and this .44 slug'll drop a man at a thousand yards and put down a buff without a twitch at three to five hundred if the aim's right. And, for some reason, that's the way the critters are; if you kill clean, the rest of 'em'll go on eatin' and pay no nevermind."

Black Bull's face was set. Quanah had fired again. *Eighteen,* Elias thought. "It's still not the Indian way," Black Bull said fiercely, stubbornly.

"No," Elias said. "Maybe you're right, maybe it ain't. It's the way only if a man's a dead shot, and the People ain't had enough ammunition to give 'em the practice, up till now. But what I said in council still holds true. I promised I'd show a way these thirty guns could be made to do the work of the three hundred I should have delivered. And I think I've proved that. Put those thirty in the hands of the best shots in each band, give 'em plenty of ammo, hunt like this, and there'll be more meat in Comanche lodges this winter than there's ever been before. Meanwhile, the other warriors go on killing in the usual way and add their score to all the rest."

"But—" Black Bull began.

"But that don't help when you need the other guns for

war against the Apaches and the Paiutes and raidin' into Mexico. But the other guns will be here by the time the fall hunt's over, and the rest of the trade goods, too."

Black Bull Man just shook his head. Then he crawled up the rise to lie down beside Quanah. Elias, rifle fully loaded, followed.

It was uncanny, he thought. Those goddamned stupid buffs! Even as Quanah fired again and the nineteenth or twentieth became another dark blot on the dun grass, the rest of the herd went on grazing. A kind of chill walked down Whitton's spine. Black Bull was right; it was like shooting cattle in a pen. The three of them, dead shots all, could probably wipe out half that herd before someone missed and it stampeded. And if three men could kill two hundred buffalo in a day—

But, of course, they wouldn't. No point in killing more than could be skinned and butchered before the meat went bad or the wolves and coyotes moved in. Indians wasted nothing, and they would shoot no more than they could use. But— He thought of what he had seen in the East, that great machine ready to plough west. White men, hundreds of them, armed with guns like these, and most dead shots, in a way the Indians could never be, with years of training and practice in a war behind them. And suppose some smart man put his finger on one central fact: the Indians lived on the buffalo. And understood, then, that if you wiped out the buffalo, you wiped out the Indians. All at once he had a shattering vision of white men on a thousand ridge-crests firing their repeating rifles into the passive herds and . . . the buffalo were inexhaustible, surely. Millions of them, as numerous as grains of sand in the desert. But— His grasp of numbers was shaky. All the same, if a thousand white men killed two hundred buffs each a day for a year— The idea staggered him. More than all the Indians on the plains would use in a hundred years. . . . Then he looked at Quanah. In profile, Quanah's face was set in an expression Elias had never seen before, a kind of fascination with the killing he was doing, the easy, get-rich-quick killing, like a white man counting his gold coins. Quanah fired again, and another

fat cow dropped. And still the herd grazed undisturbed.

That was enough, Elias thought. He put out a hand. "Quanah. The women and the old men can't handle any more. You'll only waste the meat."

Quanah knocked his hand aside. "Wait until my gun's empty! I've never killed like this before—"

"No," Elias said, "you ought to—"

The thunder of another gun chopped off his words. A hunk of meat flew off the hump of a great old bull. Only slightly wounded, the huge animal let out a bawl of pain, hoisted its tail, put down its head, charged in circles, seeking the enemy who'd hurt it. As if by magic, its anger and panic spread through the herd. Rolling ponderously into motion, it stampeded, upwind as always. Quanah, still in a kind of trance, emptied his gun into it, dropping a few more animals, dead or crippled; then the herd was out of range.

When it was gone, Quanah's wits came back. He whirled on Black Bull angrily. "Why?" he roared. "I had plenty more bullets, more sure kills! Why'd you scare them off?"

"It was waste," Black Bull said. He raised his own gun, and, with perfect accuracy, dropped the two or three wounded animals left behind. Standing up, he faced Elias. "It works, all right," he said bitterly, in English. "It works just fine."

And suddenly Elias knew that Black Bull had, like himself, looked into the future this morning and had glimpsed the same chilling vision: white men, with plenty guns and ammunition coming west, killing buffalo like this, using this technique to wipe out these great animals without which the Comanche could not live. And now he had reason to hate the white men and oppose Rancho Bravo even more. *And the worst part of it is,* Elias thought, *I can't blame him. . . .*

While Black Bull and Quanah rode down to the killing ground to make sure all animals were dead before the skinners came, Elias swung up on his buckskin, put it at a lope toward the main camp, on the east bank of the Pecos. There he would report to Noconah and recruit more

sharpshooters to instruct in this new way of killing.

It had been a near thing, he remembered as he rode.

It swept down out of the high plains, beginning above the headwaters of the Red, forded the Pecos at the Horsehead Crossing, slipped through a gap in the Santiago Mountains, followed Tornillo Creek through the sun-blasted wastes of the deepest part of the Big Bend of the Rio, and divided like a snake's tongue just above the river, forking into Chihuahua and Coahuila—the War Trail of the Comanches.

The white men had also built a road, running east and west between San Antonio and El Paso, but while the *Komantzia* still raided into Mexico, no traffic moved on the white man's road, because the forts guarding it had been deserted ever since their soldiers had been recalled at the outbreak of the Civil War.

Thus, where the two roads crossed each other at the great springs welling from the prairie southwest of the Pecos—the Springs of the Nüma, Comanche Springs—the white man's fort built there in 1857 was in ruins, its buildings of hewn limestone or adobe tumbled down, stripped of all wood to fuel Comanche fires. Its stockade had been torn down, wind whistled through glassless windows and doorless entrances unhampered, with a sound of mourning. Beyond what had once been Fort Stockton, the lodges of the Comanches spread across the land, symbol of how totally they had reclaimed what was theirs.

It was to this place that Elias had come with his pathetic packtrain, pushing hard to make the deadline set by Quanah. And it was there, in the big council lodge, next to Quanah's living quarters, that he had fought the issue out, using every resource of oratory at his command, every shrewd twist of Comanche nature that he understood.

It had been a brutal session, in that hot and crowded lodge, under all those eyes, once most friendly, now guarded, noncommittal, or openly hostile. Black Bull, of course, had been against him, laced into him like a ferret going for a rabbit's throat, but he had expected that, and was ready. What he had not expected was the fierce,

almost hostile lecture from Noconah, the graying, massive, impressive head chief of the three bands comprising what the white men called the Northern, or Plains, Comanches.

Noconah, too, had come down on him, Elias thought, like a duck on a june bug, his patience exhausted. And that was a measure of how hardpressed Noconah and his faction had been to keep the peace, how far out on a limb the chief had gone already to save Rancho Bravo for the purposes both he and Elias understood. Now the chief, and Quanah too, felt let down, betrayed, almost cornered; and it showed.

"What can I say?" Noconah rasped. "Black Bull has said it all. Promises, promises, and none of them kept. And now you come, with thirty rifles where there should be three hundred, and thirty short guns when three hundred of those, too, were promised. And we've lost so much killing time already. The buffalo are here, yes; they'll wait for us. But the sun won't wait and we need the hot sun to dry the meat so it'll keep through the winter. And now, by the time we get through killing, the bad weather will be on us. We've got to move east of the Pecos where the main herd is, and that takes time, and— You've left us standing here like fools, and maybe our children will go hungry in the winter moons. . . ." He shook his head. "And yet you ask us to hold our anger, keep our faith in you. What can you say to give us reason to do that?"

And he knew then, with a clench of his belly, that it was time to play the only cards he had. One of them he'd counted on playing, the other he had hoped he could hold back, but now both must fall on the table. Rising, careful to maintain his dignity, choosing his words precisely because the Comanches could be swayed more by the caliber of oratory than its content, he replied.

He went through a long and flowery opening, in which he admitted that everything Black Bull Man and the others had said was true. Then he came to the problem of the meat. And that was when he told them what the white men had learned about killing buffalo with the modern weapons—like the Henry rifles he had brought—which the white man's war had brought into common use.

It was not something they grasped at once or understood, though they would have sworn no one knew the buffalo better than the People, or had killed more of them. And probably they were right. But, then, he had often heard Killraine say how the commanders of both armies had not understood those new weapons either, or what they could do, and they were experts in their own field of slaughtering each other as the Comanche at killing buffalo.

The Comanche way of hunting had been dictated by the weapons they possessed. In the beginning, when they had split off from the Shoshones in the north and journeyed south, they'd had only bows and arrows. Later they got single-shot muzzle-loading muskets, made cheaply for trade, and even less reliable than the arrows. The only way of making a sure kill with such weapons was to ride hard into the herd, split it up, choose a victim, overtake it, and, at pointblank range, put the arrow or rifle ball into it. The more daring would use a lance, but in any case, it took a lot of riding and a lot of risk to make a kill.

The People did not mind that: they loved riding and loved risk. But often, through the winters, which were bitter on the high plains, they went hungry; and when children cried and wives looked grim, there was no nourishment in remembrance of the sport and excitement. At such times, each man wished he had possessed some magic that would have enabled him to kill three times, four, as many buffalo as, whatever his exertions, he had brought down.

Well, Elias told them, he had that magic. He had not brought many guns, that was true, but he had brought a lot of ammunition. And he would show them a way to use those guns so that the thirty of them, employed as he would teach them to use them, would account for as much meat as the three hundred promised used in the old way. He told them how he proposed to do it, but it did not sink in and finally he gave up. "I can tell you," he said, "but the only way you'll understand is if I show you. Give me time, let me go on the hunt with you, and you'll see.

I guarantee to put more meat in the lodges this winter, and pile the robes higher, than ever in the history of the People."

He thought he'd scored a point, but, reading Noconah's face, he knew it was not enough. That was when he realized that he had to go the final distance, ante up the life of every Rancho Bravo man like a chip on a poker table.

"You ask," he said, staring at Black Bull Man, "if you can trust Rancho Bravo. I say you can, and I will tell you why. Thirty rifles and thirty short guns aren't much. But it is the Comanche way to share with friends, and it's the Rancho Bravo way as well."

Now he faced Black Bull squarely. "You've seen our fort. You know with plenty guns and ammunition our twelve or fourteen men could stand you off a long time. You might get us in the end, but you know how Texans shoot and how many Comanches they'd kill first. Well, they no longer have plenty guns and ammunition. I've brought you thirty rifles and thirty short guns and a lot of powder and ball. There are thirteen men left on Rancho Bravo and they have thirteen rifles and thirteen pistols and far less ammunition than on those pack horses out there."

He turned to Noconah and the others, who stared at him in astonishment. "We've given you what guns we have. We have nothing else to give you but our lives." He flung out his arm. "So they're there, helpless, easy pickings if you want to take them. But—" His eyes swept around the council. "But if you do, you'll have to start with me."

They stared at him, absorbing this, and he looked back at them defiantly. It could, he knew, go either way; and he might well never leave this lodge alive. Even Noconah's face was that of a stranger, a man pushed too far, penned in a corner, confronting a choice he did not want to make.

Then Black Bull stepped forward, hand on his knife. "I have no objection to that," he said in English.

Elias stood loosely, motionless, but his right hand was not far from his holstered Colt. In this instant, he dared not take his eyes from Black Bull.

Then Noconah's voice cut the silence. "Wait! I have more to say!" He stepped between Black Bull and Elias, body straight despite his age, and scarred with old wounds received in combat, hunting, and self-inflicted ritual. His eyes, obsidian, unreadable, met Whitton's for a moment, and then he turned his back on Elias and faced the others. Under his gaze, Black Bull drew back a step.

"This is what I think," Noconah said. "I think Dark Rider and Rancho Bravo made a bad mistake in promising things they couldn't do. I'm not happy about that any more than you are, Black Bull, or you others. But I see where nothing would be gained and much lost by turning on Rancho Bravo now."

"Listen," Black Bull cut in. "If there are only so few men and guns, now's the time to stamp them out—"

Wearily, in a tone of dignity that quenched him, Noconah said, "Be still when I speak, please." Black Bull's mouth clamped and he looked away.

Noconah went on. "If these are all the extra guns they have, then killing them will bring us only a handful more. And if by giving us these and letting us know that they have no more, they've put themselves at our mercy. What more can we ask to prove their honor?

"So I say this and ask the council to agree. We've lost too much time already and we've got to hunt. That's the most important thing. We've got a long way to move a big camp, and that takes time, as well. I say first we hunt, and see what Dark Rider has to show us. Meanwhile, Rancho Bravo can do us no harm, and they can go nowhere to escape us without leaving behind their cattle. When the hunt is over, maybe the rest of the guns and goods will be here, and if so, we're satisfied. If they aren't here by then, probably they're never coming, and we'll have to talk some more and decide what to do. But right now we have no time to waste, neither the buffalo nor winter will wait on us. I say let Rancho Bravo alone and hunt the buffalo. Then we'll see. That's what I think, but I'll hear others speak."

"And I say," Black Bull snapped, "that I can take twenty men and in a week, I can—"

"We know what you can do," Noconah said. "You've proved it often. Also there are many others here who can do the same. You have a big following, but you're not yet the chief of the Quahadi band. I'd rather hear what he has to say."

Big Horse, the chief of that band, was younger than Noconah, older than Black Bull, a famous warrior in his prime. Once he had been a close friend of Elias Whitton's, but that was before the responsibility of total leadership of the Quahadi had fallen on him. Whitton knew that friendship would not weigh with him now.

A moment, while sweat ran down Whitton's flanks, while Big Horse arranged his thoughts. His problem, Elias knew, was even more complicated than Noconah's; Black Bull was leader of a considerable faction in his band. Would he bow to that faction or assert his own authority?

Then Big Horse said, "We've got to hunt. Later, if we want to rub out Rancho Bravo, we can. But meat for winter's what we need now. We've no time for war unless we're attacked."

Black Bull drew himself erect. "You don't understand," he rasped. "None of you understand. You don't know the white men the way I do."

"The Quahadi," Big Horse said firmly, "have no time for war until every lodge has meat and robes. I've said what I think."

"Then that leaves only the Needle People," Noconah said. "Kills-in-Water?"

"It's time to hunt. We can worry about Rancho Bravo later."

The big muscles in Whitton's back unlocked. He did not even need to look at Black Bull's face to know that he had won, at least for a while. It took an effort to remain impassive, but he managed it.

Then, though there was much more talking, it was over. The decision was made to move camp in the morning. The chiefs and leading men filed out, even Quanah. As Elias turned to go, as well, Noconah said, "Dark Rider. You wait, you and Black Bull."

Black Bull halted, turned, opened his mouth to protest,

then closed it. When the three of them were alone, Noconah said, evenly: "There is bad blood between the two of you. I think it's necessary to remind the both of you of the old law. If one member of the People kills another, murders him, the punishment is banishment forever. He must leave and never return, and he cannot take his wives or goods or anything but the horse he rides on, and he's dead to us forever, even though he lives."

"I know that," Elias said.

Black Bull did not speak. Noconah turned to him. "And you?"

"He's not a member of the People," Black Bull said. "He's a Rancho Bravo man."

"No," Noconah answered. "During this hunt, he is a Comanche, unless he proves different. Afterwards, there will be time to think again." His voice gentled. "Black Bull, you don't have to prove yourself every day. We all know who you are and what you can do, and we respect and admire you. There's no need for you to do anything you will regret."

"What I do, I don't regret," Black Bull said. "Thank you for the advice." He turned, went out.

Noconah stood motionless until sure he was out of earshot. Then, almost fiercely, he whirled on Elias. "Make me a cigarette."

"Yes." Quickly Elias rolled two, passed one to the chief, lit them both.

Noconah drew deeply on the smoke, but his face was angry, his voice shook slightly. "All right," he said harshly. "I've managed it again, saved you and your Rancho Bravo. But this is the last time, you understand? I've gone as far as I can go."

"I know, and I thank you."

"I don't want your thanks! I want three things from you! The first is to make your brag good about how much meat you can show us how to kill with that handful of rifles! The second is to conduct yourself like a member of the People while you're here and stay clear of Black Bull Man. Don't give him any reason to start a fight with you under any circumstances!" He chopped the air with

his hand. "I value you, and I still believe in what your Rancho Bravo can do for us. But I value Black Bull Man as well. Maybe he's right, for all I know, and I'm wrong. Maybe the only way to deal with white men *is* to kill them all, wherever we find them, when we find them! I don't know, I have to do the best I can. The third thing is, I want those rifles and those goods here when this hunt is over. If they aren't, then there's no way I can stop Black Bull any longer."

"I understand," Elias answered quietly.

"I hope you do." Noconah snorted smoke. Then he eased. "You've put me in a very tricky position. But I know it's not your fault. Thank the Father that this hunt is coming up to cool things off, give more time for those guns to get here."

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Elias said.

"Well, nothing worthwhile ever comes without trouble, I guess. Anyway, I've made Black Bull think twice about coming after you. It would kill him to be banished from the People, especially to leave that beautiful young wife of his behind. All the same, Dark Rider, you'll have to have two pairs of eyes and as many ears. Black Bull won't come at you directly, with a gun or knife, or in any way he could be banished for. But that doesn't mean something else couldn't happen."

"Like what?"

"You were never a fool, so don't be one now. There has never been a big hunt yet that hasn't cost us warriors. A bull turns too fast, or you get in someone's line of fire, or your horse goes down in the middle of a running herd. . . . You've hunted buffalo before and you know it's the next thing to war! So be careful, you understand? Be very careful."

"I will."

Noconah looked at him a moment, and then he smiled. "The People can't afford to lose either you or Black Bull. Now— Roll me another cigarette, please, and go."

Well, Elias thought as the big camp came into view, a sprawl of tepees along the Pecos, three villages, each in

concentric rings of lodges, he would report to Noconah that his method worked and there would be plenty of meat. Maybe that would ease the old man's mind. And this afternoon he would take out and train another pair of expert marksmen. If it was meat the People wanted, in another week they'd have more of it than they could handle.

Chapter Seven

THE WOMAN'S name was Smoke Rising.

Her body was full and richly curved beneath the fresh, beaded buckskin dress she had put on after the day's butchering. Her face was broad, calm, yet sensual, her dark eyes wise. She was the older sister of Woman Like A Willow, Elias Whitton's dead wife, and until six months ago, she had been married to a fine warrior named Two Wolves Running. In the spring, he had raided into Chihuahua, and he had not returned. Smoke Rising had mourned and continued to live alone, though plenty of men would have taken her as wife.

Now she clung to Whitton's arm as, together, they walked through the camp. It was curious, he thought; in his earlier days with the tribe, he had not particularly liked her, finding her too strong-willed, too possessive of her younger sister. But the intervening years had changed her. They, both of them, had survived grief and gained wisdom with time; and now it was good to have her by him. She would never be to him what Willow Woman had; no woman ever would be. But he liked her common sense, her humor, and her expert mastery of all the skills and

crafts a good Comanche woman should possess. He especially liked the fact that she knew when to talk and when to be silent.

And he liked her body under his in the robes, too, at night, her strong passion, unashamed, demanding and giving pleasure. He was glad now that when she had come to him, he had accepted her offer.

He had just left Noconah's tepee after the council at Comanche Springs, and he was still trembling with reaction, his hands shaking a little as he filled his pipe. Then her voice behind him: "Dark Rider . . ."

He turned. She was there, in the buckskin dress, white-tanned, superbly sewn. Her black hair, neatly oiled, glistened; her eyes were huge and grave as she looked up at him, with no flirtatious shyness in them. "You must be hungry. Food is ready in my lodge. Come and eat."

It would have been discourteous to turn down the invitation; besides, he *was* hungry.

Like herself, her lodge was neat, clean, organized, and, of course, devoid of any memento of her dead husband; those had been destroyed in mourning and his horses killed. She served him roasted loin of antelope. He ate greedily, then asked her: "Who kills meat for you?"

She smiled. "This man and that one. I don't go hungry."

Of course she would not, Elias thought. Such a woman: she would have many suitors.

"I don't ask them," she went on. "I don't ask for anything. But when they bring it, of course I take it."

"Yes," Elias said. Then he remembered that he had news to tell her. He spoke of Plumb and what he had done to him.

Her eyes flared. "You should have killed the dog."

"It was a mistake not to. If I see him again and he gives me a chance, maybe I will."

She nodded, was silent while he went on eating. Presently, she said, "You will hunt with us?"

"Yes."

"Then," she said, "you will need a lodge. And a woman to skin and butcher for you and to cook."

Whitton raised his head and looked at her. Levelly, she

met his gaze. "It's something I've been thinking about since you came back with your Rancho Bravo," she went on. "After you returned, I had a dream. She came to me, Willow Woman—and he did, too, my dead husband. And they both said the same: that when you were among the People you would need a lodge and a woman."

When he hesitated, she continued. "I know. In the days when you were here before, we did not get on well. I had had another man in mind for my little sister, and I did not want to see you marry her. Well, I was wrong. The man I thought would be good for her proved to be only outside, no inside; he has two wives now and they hate him because he does not hunt and he beats them for nothing. But you were a good man for Willow Woman. The best man, except maybe for Two Wolves Running, that a woman could have had. She said that in my dream, too, and that she wanted me to look after you, and Two Wolves said she was right. So here I am and here is my lodge, if you want to stay here. If it pleases you, of course."

He stared at her and for the first time she showed a touch of shyness, dropping her eyes. He considered: It would, of course, be an arrangement totally acceptable to the People, who, neither as promiscuous as the Kiowa nor as straight-laced as the Cheyenne, took a practical view of such matters. And— His eyes ran over the roundness of her body—it was strange: when you were long without a woman and only in the company of men, the desire faded and was almost forgotten, but close to someone like her again, it came back with racking intensity.

There was, too, another angle: He could have shared Quanah's lodge, or Noconah's, but in the present ticklish situation that would have been an embarrassment to all concerned. He could stay here and not put any of his friends in the political line of fire within the tribe.

He smiled. "It would please me," he said, and arranged to send a messenger to Rancho Bravo—his former brother-in-law, Bear Gut, who spoke English and whom he could trust implicitly—with the word that he had brought it off, temporarily, and that he was staying for the hunt. Then

he had moved in. Now it was good to have her beside him on his evening stroll, through a camp in a festive mood, because the meat was coming in, more of it than the tribe had seen in years.

Before a hunt, there was always dancing; rarely while one was underway. Killing buffalo was plain hard work, demanding the full strength of any Comanche old enough to be useful. Every man who could ride and shoot did so from sunup till sundown, in a wild maelstrom of dust and heat and constant danger; the women, girls, and old men had the hard work of skinning, butchering, hauling. Any child old enough to walk and tote had all he or she could do as well, even if it were only brushing flies off the meat. On top of all this, the routine chores of life went on: warriors patrolled against possible attack; boys tended the great horse herds of the three bands; there was fuel to gather, food to cook, utensils to wash, knives and axes to sharpen. Usually, by dark, people were exhausted. But since this was the first night, some of the younger people still had strength enough to dance and celebrate, and here and there drums beat and voices chanted and little groups of dancers circled and shuffled in the firelight.

Elias was totally content, as he and Smoke Rising paused here and there to speak with old friends, crack a joke or two, watch some dancers, sample a prime rib or chunk of fleece fat, or a taste of raw liver sprinkled with fresh gall. With satisfaction, he told himself that he and Rancho Bravo had gained some friends today.

Considering their lack of practice ammunition, Comanches were, by and large, excellent shots, gifted with clear eyesight, steady hands, and, above all, infinite patience. Still, in every band, certain marksmen stood head and shoulders above the rest; these had been selected by the chiefs, and he and Quanah had put in a hard day's work training them. The results had staggered even Whitton, and, of course, on the morrow they would double, keep on increasing until, inevitably, the buffalo grew nervous and hunter-wary. But, Elias realized with a sense of awe, in one stroke, he had changed the whole balance

of the Comanche way of life. In the old way of killing, riding into a running herd, picking out an animal, dropping it with arrow or rifle, it took as long to bring down a buffalo, almost, as the skinners and butchers required to process it. Now, with all thirty new rifles employed in the new way, the problem was not to kill the meat, but not to kill more of it than could be handled, not to waste anything.

The fact was, he had already perceived, that the thirty guns used the new way could, alone, kill almost enough meat for the whole Comanche tribe. A good marksman who was also a clever hunter could drop a hundred buffalo a day. Multiply that by thirty, with a tender cow or young bull weighing maybe twelve to fifteen hundred pounds, older ones reaching a ton, and— He had scratched it out in the dirt laboriously, the figures almost beyond him. Why, you had over two thousand tons of meat a day!

It was almost more than his mind could grasp, and then there were the hundreds of other hunters using the pistols he had brought, the rifles they already possessed, and their bows and arrows, too, each man dropping eight or ten a day or even more. Already, Elias understood, some limits must be set. He would have to talk to the council about it. Because they would be faced with problems they'd never encountered before: limiting the killing, dividing the meat.

Of course, he thought, as he and Smoke Rising strolled on, his hand pressed against her breast, her hip brushing his, white men would solve it neatly. They'd form a company that owned the rifles, hire thirty men to use them, employ the rest of the tribe as skinners and butchers, and then sell the meat back to all of them and boast about how well-fed everybody was under that system. With Comanches, it was not that simple. No Comanche ever really owned anything that he was not prepared to give away, and killing buffalo could never be a business with him. It was, instead, an emotional experience, and, like war, the thing for which Comanche men were trained and for which they lived. Every Comanche was a hunter, in the old way, had to be, to keep his self-respect, fulfill his destiny. It

was not just the meat, it was the hunt itself, the excitement and the risk; no brave worth his salt could let others kill for him and, himself, hire out to skin and butcher behind them. Comanche men had to live like men.

So he would have to watch it, watch it very closely, and make sure it did not turn the Comanche way of life inside out. But that was a worry for another day; tonight, everyone was jubilant about the vast amount of meat brought down, and they knew who was responsible for that, and though he hated politics, if Rancho Bravo were to survive, he had better learn how to play them and build up goodwill while he could.

They had passed from the tent camp of the Noconahs to the camp now of the Quahadis, the Antelopes. By now, it was fairly late, nine o'clock, Elias judged from the stars. But still, in the center of the Quahadi camp, drums sounded a blood-stirring roll, there were happy shouts and whistles and bawdy jokes and clapping of hands. Drawn by this, Elias and Smoke Rising drifted to the action.

The scanty crowd, mostly very young, made way for them as they came up. On its inner rim, they halted. A fire of wood, not buffalo chips, flamed, giving plenty of light. Two drummers sat at the edges of its flare, and another man played bones. In the firelight, a couple was dancing, putting on a show for the others: a tall, muscular young man, naked save for his buffalo-horn headdress, loincloth and moccasins, and a young Comanche woman in a rich, white doeskin dress, its fringes flying, shimmering, with every movement of her lithe, rounded body. The man, vital and handsome, was Black Bull; the woman, so beautiful in her youth and ripeness that even Elias felt a piercing stir, was his only wife, Sun Woman.

She was, he thought, a fitting mate for Black Bull, lovelier even than Woman Like A Willow had been. The firelight flickered on her face, exquisitely sculptured, eyes enormous, nose small, yet cleanly chiseled, mouth ripe and full; on the high breasts undamaged so far by suckling children, on the slender waist and curving hips. She was, he guessed, maybe eighteen or nineteen, had married at sixteen; but even when he had left for the East, her

beauty had already been a legend in the tribe. Such loveliness could only have been a gift of the Sun, the all-powerful, and hence her name.

Smoke Rising pressed against him as they watched the dance. It was no ritual, nothing learned or practiced, just dancing, because Indians loved to dance and could say more with their bodies than white men could in books. It was two people, very much in love, playing out the story of loving and coming together, the man handsome, perfect, aggressive, the woman lovely, shy, retreating, yet supremely powerful, and their graceful motions in the firelight kept everyone enthralled. Even Whitton, watching them, felt a lump rising in his throat, remembering how much he had loved Willow Woman. And Smoke Rising stirred restlessly, remembering, perhaps, Two Wolves Running.

And then the drumbeats ceased: it ended. The thin crowd yelled approval, but softly, considerate of the sleepers around them. Black Bull and Sun Woman stood looking at one another; and Whitton remembered what he had heard in the week he had been back. They were a legend in the tribe, for their love for each other; a joke, sometimes, because they were so young and so wrapped up in one another, and yet respected, too, because they represented a dream each man or woman had treasured at one time. Certainly they were the two finest specimens of the Comanche people Elias had ever seen, and he could not help envying both of them, for their youth and love.

They looked at one another, man and wife, in the firelight, and eyes met, locked, and Sun Woman's hand went to her breast, her lips parted. Then Black Bull reached for her, and to further shouting, she nimbly dodged and ran away, disappearing into a tepee in another circle. Black Bull shrugged, laughed, and the crowd laughed with him. Then he turned, and he saw Elias, and all laughter left his face.

The crowd went silent, sensing the change in Black Bull's bearing, knowing of his enmity toward Elias. "Dark Rider," Black Bull said, caught up, still, in the excitement

of the dance. "The black white man or the white red man," he went on loudly, mockingly. "Or what is he? Does he himself even know?"

Smoke Rising squeezed Whitton's arm. "Let's go."

"No." He pulled free, stepped forward. There was challenge in Black Bull's face, and it must be met carefully and wisely; it could not be ignored. "I know what I am," he said mildly. "Right now, I'm one of the People, a Comanche hunter. That's enough for me."

"A Comanche hunter." Black Bull's mouth twisted. "Since when is a Comanche hunter afraid to go near a buffalo bull? Since when does he have to hide and kill from a distance, instead of riding close to the horns?"

"I do what's necessary, in the way it must be done." But Whitton could feel the blood mounting in his face. "I've killed my share of bulls in close."

"Oh? But now you're too old to do it, eh? Or too afraid? Or maybe you've forgotten how?" He turned to face a group of young men who were, Elias knew, his friends and followers. "That's probably it," he said. "Living with the whites so long. He's forgotten all the Comanche ways—if he ever knew them."

Understanding, now, Elias drew in a breath. "Black Bull!"

"Oh, are you still here?" The Indian faced him in mock surprise. "Excuse me. I thought you'd gone to gossip with the old women."

"No." Elias smiled faintly in a way that wiped the mockery from Black Bull's face. "Why don't we hunt together tomorrow, you and I?"

Black Bull spat. "I'm sorry, I don't hunt your way. I think it's a stinking way."

"Then we'll hunt yours," Elias said.

Black Bull was silent for a moment. Then he grinned. "My way? The old way?"

"Any way you want it," Elias said.

Black Bull's eyes lit; now he had what he wanted. "The old way, then. The *true* old way. With the bow and lance."

Elias started slightly; he had not counted on this. Black Bull saw his reacton. "'Anybody can kill a running bull

with a new high-powered repeating rifle, but it takes a real Comanche to use the lance or drop one with an arrow. When a man can do that, he's a hunter of the People. But—" he shrugged "—it probably wouldn't be fair. You wouldn't be Comanche enough to compete with me that way."

Elias said, "What time do you want to start?"

"You mean—?" Black Bull's eyes flickered; then he recovered, and his smile widened. "We'll leave an hour before daylight, of course. There's a good-sized herd west of the river that's never been touched so far. We can be in position when the sun comes up."

"All right. I'll have to borrow the weapons and some good horses."

"Wait a minute," Black Bull said. Leaving the firelight, he disappeared into a lodge.

"Dark Rider," Smoke Rising whispered. "Don't—"

"I have to. This has got to be settled. If I swallow his insults, refuse his challenges, how long you think I will be able to make my voice heard among the People?"

"All the same—" But she broke off as Black Bull returned.

In one hand he held a fine juniper-wood bow, short, slightly recurved, strung with cord made from the strong tendons that lay along the spine of a bull buffalo; a panther-skin quiver, tail still attached, contained two dozen arrows. In the other hand, he carried a lance, seven-foot haft straight and thick, eight-inch head of steel filed razor sharp. He held out the weapons to Elias. "My own. You can use them. They're the best in camp, I guarantee that. I'll borrow what I need myself. As for horses, I'll have three good buffalo horses waiting for you in the morning."

Accepting the weapons, Elias said, "I thank you. Until tomorrow, then. Good night, sleep well," he told the watchers with Comanche courtesy.

Black Bull stared at him speculatively, as if not understanding his matter-of-fact acceptance. "Good night," he said at last. "Tomorrow, we'll see who kills the most meat."

"I tell you," Smoke Rising said furiously, "it's not the thing to do! Don't you see what he's up to? He'll make sure you never come home from that hunt alive!"

"Maybe I'll have something to say about that." They were in her lodge; he was carefully examining the weapons Black Bull had lent him. Every arrow was straight and sharp, well-feathered, the bow sound and very powerful, its string and the extras in the quiver fresh and strong. The lance was just as perfect.

"You have nothing to say, you won't be able to help yourself!" Her eyes pleaded with him, her mouth quivered. "He's the best hunter in camp and as shrewd and tricky as Old Man Coyote! Not even Quanah himself can match him! Dark Rider, don't you understand? He'll drag you in like quicksand, take every crazy risk and dare you to match him! But he's young and quick and so determined to wipe out his white raising that he uses the bow and lance more than any man in the Quahadi band. He's always in practice! You can't keep up with him, and—"

"Well, I've got to try," Elias said. "It's important to me and Rancho Bravo, and important to Noconah and Quanah, too. Sure, he's got an edge on me; I haven't used a bow or lance in years. But when I first came to the People, I used 'em every day. Had to. They were better than the old trade muskets and we didn't have that much powder and ball. Did you see his face? He didn't think I knew how to use 'em at all."

"Oh, listen to me—" Smoke Rising said.

"No, you listen to me." Whitton went to her, touched the smoothness of her cheek, looked down into her eyes, moved by what he saw there. "I don't intend to get killed tomorrow. And maybe he's got an edge, but maybe I've got one, too. I've been around a long time, Smoke Rising, a lot longer than Black Bull Man, and that counts for something. Now, don't you worry. I do what I've got to do, no more, no less. You come along tomorrow, skin and butcher for me. You'll see a show, but I'll be right here in those robes with you tomorrow night."

"Oh, I hope so, I hope so," she whispered despairingly

and her arms went around him and she pressed her head against his chest.

Whitton held her, stroking her. She was right, of course; tomorrow would be a risk, a big one, but one he could not dodge and still speak for Rancho Bravo with the People. But there was more than that, he realized: even if there had never been a Rancho Bravo, there was still something in him that would have forced him to accept that challenge. It was his manhood, part of the same thing that suddenly struck him through with desire and made him pull Smoke Rising down into the warm secrecy of the soft robe bed. She sensed it, too, responded almost helplessly, peeling away the buckskin dress, the warm softness of her full of urgency and passion. . . .

Whitton waited until he was sure she slept. Then he got up, strung the bow, nocked an arrow, and drew it several times, getting its feel and heft. Later, if Smoke Rising had awakened from her sated sleep, she would have seen him, in the dying firelight, practicing with the lance.

Chapter Eight

THE BUFFALO WERE there, all right, exactly where Black Bull had said they'd be, in the wide, shallow valley west of the river: three or four hundred dark blots spread out across the flats, grazing peacefully on lush grama. Whitton's pulse pounded with the old familiar excitement of the hunt, but, like the others, he kept a tight rein on the fine painted stallion he rode.

There were fifteen warriors on this side of the valley,

another fifteen on the other side, and most were Black Bull's followers, come along to see the fun. Now, in order as rigid and disciplined as any well-trained cavalry, both contingents moved, in line, toward the herd. Only when Black Bull gave the signal would they charge; any man who broke ranks and set the heard to running prematurely would earn a brutal whipping from the others.

Whitton nocked an arrow to the bow, gripping the horse with his thighs. Like all the others, he was nearly naked, and he rode bareback; his legs and a single-reined rawhide jaw bridle would control the horse. Once the action started, it would need little guidance; a well-trained buffalo-running horse knew its business as well as its rider did. Whitton had already put this one lent to him by Black Bull through its paces and, once they had learned each other, had found it superb.

He looked at Black Bull, on his big spotted stallion, slightly ahead of the rest of the line. The Comanche was watching the buffalo intently, handsome face set, eyes glittering with excitement. "Child's play," he'd told the others after he and Whitton had scouted the herd. "A good running ground, a good killing ground. Half of you swing south, come in from the other flank. The rest, Dark Rider and me, we'll hit them from this side." He looked at Whitton. "All right?"

"Fine," Elias answered, grinning crookedly. Black Bull had deliberately chosen the most difficult approach. The hunters on the left flank would have clear heart shots the minute they hit the herd; those on this one, the right, would have to ride in among the buffalo to get at the vital spot behind the left foreleg.

Black Bull returned his grin with a touch of mockery. "No point in making it too easy," he said. Then he swung his horse and rode to where his wife, Sun Woman, sat upon her travois-rigged pony, among the women, children, and old men who followed the hunters. Sun Woman was, Elias admitted, deserving of her name in this first golden morning light; she was enough to take your breath away. Her face was full of pride and love as Black Bull came to her, and she put out a hand to touch his wrist. With a

touch of the arrogance that characterized her man, she said, "Husband, go and kill a lot of meat."

"Yes," Black Bull said, looking at her in that way that had made their love both a joke and a thing for envy in the band.

Then Smoke Rising said, from behind Elias: "Dark Rider."

He turned the horse. There was fear in her eyes, and her face was haggard; her night had been a restless one. But her own voice rang with pride, encouragement, betraying nothing of what she felt. "You will kill as much or more as anyone."

Whitton smiled. "I'll do my best. Anyhow, we'll have some fun today."

Then Black Bull said, "Let's move out."

"Good luck," Smoke Rising said.

Now Black Bull s horse was trotting and the line of warriors picked up the gait. Across the valley, the other hunters were coming faster, too. Both contingents came down the wind, toward the head of the herd. It was already getting restless, catching their scent. But when it ran, it would run upwind; buffalo always did. Thus the hunters would be in the head of the herd immediately, saving their horses' strength. The front of the herd, too, was where the prime fat cows would be; the strong, tough old bulls always brought up the rear. Even now, tossing their heads and snorting, they were taking the precaution of drifting back there.

And now they, the hunters, were only three or four hundred yards away, and the bulls began to moan and paw the earth, facing outward on either flank, and the cows were more restless, some calling to their calves. A kind of shudder rippled through the big herd, and— Another twenty yards. Then a yell like that of a tortured soul in Hell broke from Black Bull's throat; his big stallion was running hard, like an arrow from a bow, and Whitton knotted the loose rein's end in a tuft of mane and touched his stud with his heels and it went streaking toward the herd.

With a sound like rolling thunder, the buffalo stam-

peded, heading up the valley, up the wind, and the shrieking, yelling men came down on them, and Whitton's horse stretched itself, and the wind was in his face, and the rank smell of all those shaggy bodies, and the dust now roiling, and he was whooping the Comanche yell without even knowing he did it, and he and his horse were one, and now he was in the herd, in among those great humped animals with their sharp, black-tipped horns, and he saw a fat young cow ahead and touched his horse with pressure of his thigh; the stud spotted her, locked on her, and now it would do the rest. Like a chip on a rushing river of running buffalo, it swerved and dodged and never broke its gait, and Whitton's legs clamped hard and his body with graceful balance followed its every turn; to fall off would mean instant death beneath those hooves or at those horns.

The cow had a good lead, and a frightened buffalo could, over short distances, match a running horse for speed, but the big stallion gained inexorably, overtaking her, and now she knew she was the one singled out and tried to turn back into the safety of the herd, but the stud was there first, and she sheered off and it turned to follow her and, blocked, she ran on, tail up and kinked, head down, legs flying. Like grim death, the stallion drew up level with her and fifteen feet away. A heel's touch brought it closer, ten feet, five; now Elias could have reached out and touched her with the bow. Instead, he drew the arrow until its feather touched his cheekbone, let it slip. The honed steel point went in high and downward behind the foreleg, to slice both heart and lungs; its feathers disappeared completely in the shag of pelt. The horse sheered off as the cow, at a dead run, fell sliding, forelegs buckling, then rolled over. Never checking, Whitton and the stallion swung back toward the herd, seeking a new victim.

It had hit full speed, now, and become more compact as riders closed on either flank. Elias caught a glimpse of Black Bull, in among those great wild cattle, in a sea of humps and horns, riding like the wind itself, with total, crazy disregard for his own safety. If one of those big creatures bumped his mount or caught it with a horn, if

his horse went down— But Black Bull only let an arrow fly, and Elias saw a cow fall, and then Black Bull had nocked another arrow, aimed, and let it slip. Another cow turned out, running slowly, awkwardly, Black Bull's shaft only halfway in her body and a little high. She would die, but not quickly; but that made no difference to the young Comanche. He was already looking for another target.

Elias grunted something in his throat. The young fool! So that was how he was playing it, eh! Not for the sure, thorough kill; that took the extra time to get the quarry in position, ride in close, take proper aim, but for any kind of kill he could rack up. The sloppy kill, the quick kill. Whitton's mouth twisted: he'd expected better of Black Bull. But obviously the Comanche was so afraid Dark Rider would outkill him that he would cut any corner necessary to win. . . .

Well, then, let him! Whitton thought. His horse had already picked another target, a young, fat cow, prime meat. She was well in the edge of the herd, but there was room to get to her, and the horse headed for the slot. Now Whitton was among that sea of horns and humps, too, and he forgot Black Bull Man, forgot everything but staying on that twisting, snaking stallion, working toward a proper heart shot on the cow.

He drew his arrow, held it ready. She was breaking outward now, he had a chance, he could let the arrow go; he knew he'd hit her and hit her hard. But he could not be sure of a clean kill, yet, he was a little too far behind, and, laterally, a little too far away. No, wait, let Black Bull do it his way, but he'd do it right himself. A wounded buffalo, even dying slowly, was an added danger to every hunter and, later, to the skinners. . . . He held the arrow for extra seconds, and this time, when he let it go, he was close enough so it went clean through her and came out the other side. She dropped like a stone, and the horse grunted its approval and turned back to the herd of its own accord. Black Bull was far ahead, now, riding like a madman and loosing arrows like one, too.

Four cows dead, and every one a good, clean kill; and

not even a stallion as fine as this one could give much more without breaking its wind or its heart. White lather covered it from nostrils to tail, and coated Whitton's thighs as well, and made the wild, swerving bareback riding that much more dangerous. Still, it wanted to go on, as Whitton turned it out and back, slowing it to a lope, heading away from the herd, which still pounded on, and making for the gently sloping valley wall a quarter of a mile away where he could shift to a fresh mount.

Then he was aware of hooves drumming up beside him, and Black Bull Man drew abreast, grinning broadly beneath his sweaty paint. Like Whitton's, his stud was foam-smeared, panting; and Elias saw that Black Bull's quiver was nearly empty.

Black Bull's eyes went quickly to the arrows in Whitton's quiver, which was still nearly full. "Hiii, Dark Rider! How many have you killed?"

For answer, Elias raised four fingers.

Black Bull laughed. "And I've got at least twice that many to my credit! This isn't an old man's game, eh?"

"It's not a young fool's, either!" Whitton's temper snapped. "My four kills are clean!" He pulled up his horse, turned it, flung out his arm. "Look!"

In the herd's wake, dead animals were dark blots on the valley floor. But there were still a handful on their feet; some motionless, heads down; others lurching sickly, aimlessly, bawling with the pain of gut shots.

"Since when is that a Comanche way of killing!" Elias roared. "Hell, a Tonkawa could bring down a dozen like that, but he wouldn't brag about it! Until those animals are finished off, the skinners can't even get to work!"

Black Bull's face went hard, eyes like chips of glass. His hand groped at his side, but there was no weapon there, neither gun nor knife. Then he said, tersely, "They'll be finished off, don't worry." He kicked the stallion, sent it running toward the group of remounts.

Elias grunted a curse, loped after him. Black Bull was lucky Noconah wasn't along. Noconah would have taken the hide off him for that sloppy kind of killing. When he reached the spare horses and the waiting skinners, he

went straight to Smoke Rising. "Don't you go out there to butcher," he warned, "until we've made sure all those animals are dead."

She nodded. Black Bull flashed by, pounding toward the herd again, without a look at either of them. Whitton remounted, telling a boy to walk the used-up stallion and cool it out, and rode back to the hunt.

The herd had slowed, now, and opened up, splitting into smaller bands; the exhausted bulls and cows with calves were turning at bay, getting dangerous. Black Bull flashed among them with total disregard for his own safety, and still, Elias saw, with just as total disregard for the clean kill. Nothing mattered but the big score, the chance to jeer at Dark Rider after the hunt.

Well, let him and his young men play their game any way they choose, Whitton vowed. For himself, he'd follow his own rules in his own way. He, too, rode among the bulls and dangerous cows, but never loosed an arrow except at a target prime for meat or hide. . . .

And then it was over for all of them, their quivers empty, their horses exhausted, the buffalo scattered, and all the meat the skinners and butchers could handle and carry. But there was still work to do, dangerous work, for there were too many wounded animals to finish off. Whitton turned his horse, rode back to where the women waited; he had left his rifle and shell belt with Smoke Rising. He would not need it on animals he'd brought down, but he'd use it quickly to dispose of the wounded so the butchering could begin.

But as Smoke Rising passed the gun to him, Black Bull's voice behind him yelled, "Dark Rider! What do you think you'll do with that?"

"Clean up your mess behind you so these people can get to work," Elias answered grimly.

"I clean up my own mess in my own way," Black Bull snapped, taking his lance from Sun Woman, who looked at Whitton with a hatred that matched her husband's. "With this. You've got one, too. You got the nerve to use it?"

Whitton stared at him a moment, then nodded with a

kind of weariness. "Take this." He passed the gun back to Smoke Rising, and, wordlessly, she handed him the lance. "All right," he said. "Let's go and get it over with. The skinners are waiting."

For him it was a grim and dirty business, but, of course, Black Bull made a show of it. Whitton would pick a wounded animal, circle it until he had a fair, sure opening, then move in hard and fast from behind, lance braced, sink its point, razor sharp, deep in behind the leg, let the weight of the falling animal pull it free again. Even so, always careful of horse and himself, he took a horn swipe across the thigh from an old cow that drew blood.

Black Bull, though, was playing to his audience—the other braves, the women and children and old men on the hill. Remounted on his favorite stallion, he worked each wounded animal as a matador might a bull, provoking charges, barely dodging them, taking needless risk after risk to prove his manhood; and only when the animal was exhausted or already nearly dead, did he sink home the lance. Whitton's disgust rose: he had thought better of Black Bull Man.

He was not the only one with the same reaction. A brave named Lame Bird drew up beside him as Whitton gave up, leaving the rest to Black Bull. "You can use a lance," Lame Bird said grudgingly, for he was one of Black Bull's closest followers. "You use it as it should be used. Him— I think he's gone crazy today."

"Today? He's not always like this?"

"No. But he can get like this when she's watching." He pointed to the people waiting across the valley. "Sun Woman. He must always put on a show for her." He let out a breath as a wounded bull charged Black Bull head on; Black Bull laughed, and the stallion swung its hindquarters, and the bull rushed past, grazing the animal with its horn. Then, exhausted, it fell to its knees. Black Bull rode around it, trying to provoke it to rise and charge again; when it would not, disgustedly he finished it with the lance.

Lame Bird sighed relievedly. "I guess that's all." Every

animal now was down and motionless, the valley floor littered with their carcasses. Even as he spoke, Black Bull made the stallion rear, and as it came down he waved and whooped a signal to the women. They, the old men and children, and the travois-hitched horses streamed down the hill.

It was, Elias thought, like a field of battle after the fighting. The warriors rode among the dead, each identifying his kills by the markings on the arrows in its carcass, retrieving those that were unbroken and returning them to their quivers. Their families and relatives swarmed over the kills, knives and hatchets flashing. They cut the throats, drained the blood and drank some of it, went into the body cavities, brought out the livers. They cut the tongues; they skinned the bodies carefully, the warriors helping now, using ropes to turn them over, but letting the women do the actual butchering. They cut out the big tendons along the spines and coiled them for drying and use as cord and rope; everyone worked, and nothing was wasted, and there was joy and a feeling of possessing great wealth, and all of them were smeared with blood and grease. In a space of time astonishingly short, a carcass could be stripped, the meat rolled in hide and bundled on a travois, with the camp dogs that trailed the butchers fighting over the bones.

There were plenty of women in camp who had no men to kill for them and were dependent on others' charity; these helped Smoke Rising process Whitton's kills. A coterie of them, and of relatives, followed Sun Woman, too, as she worked on Black Bull's kills. Once, when she and Smoke Rising found themselves working on carcasses that lay almost side by side, Sun Woman smoothed back her hair with a bloody hand, looked at Smoke Rising mockingly. "Hiyeh! I knew my man would kill the most! He's the best meat bringer in the camp!" Smoke Rising stared back a moment, spat, and turned away. Sun Woman laughed, snapped orders to her followers, went on to the next dead animal, a huge cow fifty yards away, one of Black Bull's arrows protruding from its paunch, its pelt

sodden with blood from the finishing lance wound behind its shoulder.

Smoke Rising stared after her. "What a child. What a spoiled child. Just like her husband."

Whitton nodded. Black Bull, for the moment, had ridden up the valley, was laughing with a bunch of cronies, gesturing expansively, bragging, and Elias knew at who's expense. Whitton's mouth thinned as he coiled the rawhide rope with which he'd just turned a carcass over. He was about to answer Smoke Rising when a woman's scream of terror shattered the afternoon.

Elias jerked around, stared. Sun Woman had been bending over the dead cow. But the animal *wasn't* dead! All at once, with amazing speed, it was scrabbling to its feet. Sun Woman jumped back, stood there frozen for a second that seemed endless. Then, blood trailing from its belly, the cow put down its head and charged.

Sun Woman screamed again, turned and ran, the cow hard behind her, bawling terribly with the pain every step it took cost it, but coming fast all the same. And it was gaining on her now, those black horns hooking just behind her back. Seconds more and—

Whitton's paralysis of surprise broke and from then on it was instinctive. His arrow quiver empty, the lance left sticking in another carcass he'd marked for Smoke Rising, he had no weapon. He kicked the horse and sent it streaking as Sun Woman changed direction and the cow turned after her.

Turning was painful for the wounded buffalo; it did so awkwardly and that gained Sun Woman an extra yard—and Whitton the few precious seconds his racing horse had to have. Now the cow was after her again, and—Then she tripped and fell, sprawling on her face. There was no time for anything but what Elias did—guiding the horse with his knees, he sent it smashing full tilt into the charging cow just at the hump.

The impact was like colliding with a locomotive. The horse's weight knocked the cow flat on her side, but the stud went down on top of her. Elias quit its back almost in time, not quite; horseflesh crushed down on him, pinning

him against the struggling buffalo's bloody flank. A black horn slashed past his face, inches from his eyes; a flailing hoof whished past his ear. Then the horse was rolling free, scrambling to its feet, and the cow, seemingly indestructible, was coming up. As Elias, swaying, dazed, managed to stand, the indomitable cow came after him. He had no strength left to run: as those black horns bore down on him, he reached out and seized the left one with his left hand, hung on, quite literally, for dear life. The cow bawled, dragged him as she ran on, shook him like a rag doll as she tossed her head; the world whirled crazily. Then he saw it, the arrow protruding from her paunch. With his right hand he struck at it, hit it, drove it to its feathers in her, sinking the shaft a good eight inches more. The cow moaned strangely, ran one more step, and then it fell. The big splayed hooves, kicking in death agony, scraped Whitton's flank, then were still. Elias let go the horn, rolled away, lay panting on the ground, his body drenched with blood, how much of it his own he could not tell.

"Dark Rider!" Smoke Rising's voice in his ear, her hands on him. And then a savage cursing, in white man's profanity. "Goddamn you, goddamn you . . ." Whitton's vision cleared, he managed to sit up, stare at the spectacle of Black Bull, dismounted, quite insane with fear and rage, sinking his lance again and again into the dead cow's carcass.

"Sun Woman . . ." Elias whispered.

"She's all right," Smoke Rising answered bitterly. "Not a scratch. But you—"

Carefully, gingerly, Elias Whitton got to his feet, stood there swaying, with her help. He was stiff and sore, deeply bruised, hide scraped by hoof and horn, but otherwise he seemed to be intact; most of the blood on him was the buffalo's. He swung his head, saw Black Bull's wife staring at her man, still slashing at the cow.

Whitton found his voice. "All right, Black Bull," he husked. "You can stop now. She's long since dead."

Black Bull raised the lance again; but this time he did not slash down with it. He looked at Whitton, eyes swirl-

ing; then they cleared. Suddenly he let out a breath, tossed the lance aside, stepped around the carcass of the cow. His face was strange, unreadable. "You saved her," he muttered. "You saved her life. And mine, because if that cow had got her—" Unconsciously, he spoke English.

"Let it ride," Elias answered in the same language. "I happened to be the closest."

"No, I can't let it ride. I— What do you want, Whitton? Anything I have, all my horses, my guns, anything—" His voice shook. "You were right. I was a fool. I was a goddamned fool."

"We'll talk about it later," Elias answered. Suddenly he was very weary. Black Bull's words had stirred an idea in his mind, but just now he was too tired to fully grasp it. "Just bring me a horse so I can ride on in."

Chapter Nine

"THERE'S SOMEONE OUTSIDE who wants to see you," Smoke Rising said, a strange expression on her face.

Stiffly, Elias Whitton arose from the robe bed. "Well, tell him to come in."

"No, I think you had better go outside."

Elias frowned, nodded, and slipped through the doorway of the lodge, wincing slightly. Even though a day had passed since the buffalo hunt, he had enough deep bruises so that he was still sore; but he had taken worse breaking horses, hunting wild longhorns in the brush, and driving cattle. He straightened up, blinking against the morning sun. Then he stared at the four fine stallions, heavily laden, whose lead-ropes Black Bull Man held.

"Hell's fire," Elias said.

"Good morning, Whitton." Black Bull's voice was soft, shy. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. But what's all this?"

Black Bull gnawed his lower lip. "They're yours, all of them, and more—all my horses if you want them. Look." Before Whitton could speak, he gestured. "You know this stud, my own war and buffalo horse; and this one you rode yesterday. This is a gelding and he's mostly Spanish blood. I got him on a raid in Mexico, he can run like the wind; and this brood mare, you can see the hot blood in her. She drops fine foals every time. And here—" He unlashed a buffalo robe pack, quickly spread it open on the ground. "This bow, quiver, these arrows—made by Howling Dog, and you know that they don't come any better among the People. And moccasins and this buckskin suit." He held it up, and it was breathtaking in its splendor, of white-tanned doeskin, gorgeously beaded. "It should fit you perfectly. Smoke Rising gave us some of your clothes last night while you slept and Sun Woman and her sisters sat up all night changing it and making it right."

When Whitton only stared, speechless, Black Bull jumped nervously to his feet. "These two packs are robes, the finest, deepest pelts, tanned as only Sun Woman and her family know how. And here—" He took a fourth, smaller pack from the mare, opened it. Mostly it consisted of finely worked deer and antelope hides, but he unfolded those, layer after layer. "I found these in the house of the Alcalde of a Chihuahua village we hit. I want you to have them." In each hand he held a small bar of gold. "I don't know what they're worth, but several hundred dollars each, I'd guess. They're yours." He quickly closed the pack and lashed it, got to his feet. "I know it's not enough. Tell me what else you'd like, what you want. If I don't have it, I'll trade for it or make a raid for it. I want to pay you. I want to pay you everything I owe you."

Whitton groped for words. This was a Black Bull Man he had never seen before, uncertain, hesitant, drained of arrogance. "You don't owe me anything," Whitton said.

Then the pride came back, darkening Black Bull's face. "I owe you Sun Woman's life. My wife's life. That means I owe you everything. Or maybe you can't understand that?"

Elias thought of Willow Woman, and he understood, all right. And he understood, too, that he had it in his power now to take whatever revenge he chose on Black Bull, to shame him and humiliate him before the tribe. All he had to do was decline these presents with the same arrogance Black Bull had shown toward him until now. That would make Black Bull a laughing stock.

Or there was another way. He could, legitimately, demand everything Black Bull had, right down to the moccasins on his feet. He could strip and impoverish Black Bull and Sun Woman, leave them paupers.

He had no intention of doing either. That flickering idea in his mind yesterday, the one he'd been too tired to grasp, had quickly bloomed, matured. He drew himself up. "I accept this, all this, with thanks." Later, he thought, he would find opportunity to give back the Comanche's personal war horse; but right now, he had to strike hard and fast on behalf of Rancho Bravo. "But you're right, they're not enough."

Black Bull looked almost relieved. "Then say what you want. I will give you every horse I have, and my guns—"

"No. I don't want your horses and your guns."

The Indian looked dismayed. "But I have nothing else." Again he bit his lip. "But tell me, and I'll get it—"

"All I want's to talk to you," Elias said. "I want to talk and have you listen until I'm finished. An hour, maybe two, nobody else around."

"Now, wait. That's not what—"

"You counted on. No. You figured on paying me off nice and clean with horses and gold. Then we'd be even, and it could start all over again. Well, I'm not going to let you off the hook that easy. That's my price, Black Bull. All you've offered so far, plus some talk. Otherwise, I take nothing."

On Black Bull's face he read resentment at being

trapped this way. Then the Indian let out a long, rasping breath. "I have no choice. All right. Come on to my lodge."

It was well-kept, the home of a good provider with a clever, industrious wife. Sun Woman was surprised to see Whitton, but instantly she came to him. "Welcome, Dark Rider. My husband and I have much to thank you for."

"Black Bull would have done it for Smoke Rising. It's what any man of the People would do for any woman."

"You're too modest. I thought my hour had come. Sit down, let me bring you food."

"No," Black Bull said gently. "That later. For now, leave us. We have things to talk about."

After she had done so, he sat down across the fire from Whitton, his features stony. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Elias hesitated, summoning exactly the arguments he must use. Then he began to speak, in English, for there were no words in Comanche for much of what he had to say. He talked for a long time, using all the persuasiveness and eloquence at his command, but never once did Black Bull's face show a flicker of expression.

"And there it is," Elias finished. "That's what I'm trying to do. Not build an empire for some white men—but use the white men to make sure the Comanches keep their own. I tell you, unless you've seen it, you can't believe it, the power the white men got now. It looks like half the Confederates that got beat have come to Texas. They'll be headin' west, lookin' for a new life. And the Army'll come with 'em, not the puny little Army that was here before, but a new one, with new weapons. And all the forts that they abandoned, they'll take back, rebuilt—Stockton, Davis, all the rest."

For the first time, Black Bull spoke. "Not if we kill 'em off, fast as they come."

"Yeah, that sounds good," Elias answered. "But how you gonna do it? You've made war against the Mexicans, the Apaches, the Paiutes, a lot of other people. You've killed as many of them as you could. But there's still a lot of 'em around. If you can't wipe them out, how do you

expect to wipe out the whole United States of America?"

For a moment the Comanche was silent. Then he said, "It's your idea this Rancho Bravo will be on our side, strengthen our hand against the whites?"

"Yeah. They'll make sure the Comanches are treated square, the treaties kept, the rights you're guaranteed not abused."

"And why would they do this?"

"Because they got to; they're in too deep to git out. As long as there's peace, Rancho Bravo thrives; come war against the whites, and don't you think Calhoon and them others know who'll be the first to go?"

Something flickered in Black Bull's eyes. "That's gospel," he said. "They would be. All the same, what makes you think they draw enough water to do us any good?"

"They will. They'll have money, lots of it, and you know what that means. They're smart and they got guts. On top of which, Killraine's uncle in Washin'ton's a bigshot senator. They can stand by the People when the Army comes, put on pressure in the gover'ment—"

"And make sure we're not taken 'vantage of," Black Bull said.

"That's it," Elias said.

Black Bull looked at him for a moment, bleakly. Then he shook his head. "Whitton, I feel sorry for you."

"What?" Elias tensed.

"You're like a little child still believin' the magic stories the old folks tell. Do you really think any white man will keep their word to Injuns?"

"Rancho Bravo will. And the government in Washington—"

"The government!" Black Bull spat into the fire. "What do you take me for? You're not talkin' to a wild Comanche that's never even seen a newspaper, much less can read one, that thinks the white man's government works like a tribal council. I know how it works, and it ain't no better than the rest of the whites. It lies just like any horse trader or crooked gambler. It does what the rich men tell it and craps all over its own poor people. And if it treats

its own people like that, you think it'll treat the Injuns any different?"

Elias cut in. "Yeah. Yeah, I think it will." There was passion in his voice. "You look at me. I ain't white, neither. I'm black as the ace of spades, and I used to be a slave. But the government decided holdin' black men in slavery was wrong and it set out to stop it—and a lot of white men died so I'd be free. The government's kept its promises to me; I'm an American citizen now—"

"Well, the Comanches aren't," Black Bull said. "They can't vote, and they ain't no good for workin' in factories, and they don't pay taxes, and they got an awful lot of land the whites can use; you've said so yourself." His voice gentled, and now it was almost sad, pitying. "Listen, Dark Rider. I don't doubt your good faith. You're a lot of man, and a lot of Comanche. But . . . you're caught up in a dream. Me, I'm no dreamer. I know the whites and I know there ain't but two ways out: fight 'em and either win or die like a free Comanche; or trust 'em and let them steal everything you got and wind up on a reservation, belly-crawlin' to 'em for a little bit of food to feed your starvin' children. There's no in-between."

Elias met his eyes, and, in that moment, he knew uncertainty and a kind of heart-grabbing fear. Black Bull, for all his single-minded hatred, was no fool, either. And maybe, just maybe, he knew white men better than Elias Whitton. *What if I'm wrong?* Whitton thought. *And he is right?*

That was something he dared not dwell on. "I think there is. And I think Rancho Bravo can show the way."

"I don't know," Black Bull said, almost wearily. "I only know this, Dark Rider. I can be a fool sometimes; I was yesterday. But all that matters to me, really matters, is the People. In the long run, I want only what's best for them. Whether it's best that Rancho Bravo stay or that it and all the other whites be—" He spread his hand in a gesture of rubbing out. Then he went on. "But I'll think about it. I owe you that much. I'll think about it and we'll talk some more."

"All you want to, when you want to," Elias said.

"Good. I . . ." Black Bull looked down at the fire. "I think maybe it's important that we talk, you and me. You don't know, Dark Rider. You don't know how many nights I lie awake, wondering, the questions I have in my mind. And I can't seem to get things straight. Maybe what I need is to talk about it—with somebody like you. These others, they can't understand, but you and I—"

"Yeah. We've lived among 'em, we know how they think and operate. It's something you can't explain to the others that don't."

"No, but— Mind you, I'm not sayin' I'll change my mind" The Comanche's voice crackled. "All I'm sayin' is that you give your arguments, I'll give mine and we'll see."

"Fair enough. There'll be plenty of time before the hunt's over."

"Yes," Black Bull said, with a kind of eagerness. "Yes, we'll talk a lot." Then he went to the lodge door. "Sun Woman!" he called out. "Bring us food! We're ready now to eat!"

For the People, the ten days that followed were good ones, fat ones. Buffalo in plenty, hunted the old way and the new, the racks of drying meat stretching all around the camp, the pegged-out hides, flesh side up like giant snowflakes on the prairie. There would be panniers of dried, smoked buffalo beef to last through the winter, and smoked tongue, and buffalo paunches stuffed with pemmican; warm robes, new lodge skins, and plenty of sinew rope and cord. Later the bands would split up, some wintering eastward in brushy country, some in the great Palo Duro canyon on the Staked Plains; that they would not starve waiting for the spring was now assured. Meanwhile, gorging on fresh meat and fat, the always pudgy Comanches grew chunkier; yet, when a warrior mounted his horse, he seemed magically to slim, become lean and graceful.

They were good days for Elias Whitton, too, and would have been better if there had been some news of the Colorado outfit. But Bear Gut returned from Rancho

Bravo without any, and Whitton tried to put it from his mind, temporarily. There was, after all, the pleasure of the hunt, the comradeship of the camp, and Smoke Rising beside him in the bed at night.

And the long talks with Black Bull. It dawned on Elias that, for all his prestige in the tribe, for all the beauty and lovingness of Sun Woman, the young Comanche was a lonely man. Despite his attempts to obliterate it by being the most Comanche of Comanches, he'd been marked indelibly by his early life among the Texans, had seen things the other Indians could not imagine, had learned a way of thinking wholly foreign to them. He seemed almost ravenous for the long conversations Elias made a point of holding with him daily, always with the same thrust, the future of the People and how to deal with the whites when they came, but ranging over many other topics, too.

One step at a time, Elias thought; all he was out to do right now was erase Black Bull's enmity toward Rancho Bravo, make him see that it was something that deserved to live and have its chance. But whether he made any progress, he could not tell. At least, though, he'd given Black Bull food for thought.

For all that, there still remained a barrier between them: Black Bull's pride. They were not friends in the usual sense; Black Bull would not commit himself to warm comradeship at this stage of the game, though Whitton found himself admiring the young Indian and his lovely wife enormously. Black Bull was like a wild dog, he thought, hungering for something he could not name, lurking outside the firelight circle of a camp, longing to come in, yet afraid to. Well, even that was better than the former implacable enmity.

There were times, too, when being close to Black Bull and Sun Woman stirred a kind of pain in him. They were so deeply devoted to one another that old memories of Willow Woman came back to haunt him. He felt affection for Smoke Rising, maybe even a kind of love, but he knew that for him there would never again be anything like what he had felt for Woman Like A Willow or what

Black Bull and Sun Woman had, and he envied them.

And now the hunt was ending, and soon he must return to Rancho Bravo. As the time drew near, his sense of well-being ebbed. What if the goods still had not come from Colorado? Was there any way he could wangle more time from the Comanches? Despite the successful hunt, there were still many things the People needed before they went into winter camp, expected Rancho Bravo to provide. He was by no means out of the woods yet, unless all that could be delivered; indeed, time was running out on him.

And a deeper fear nagged at him, too, one haunting him this afternoon as he sat before Smoke Rising's lodge, cleaning his weapons. If the Colorado outfit still had not returned, would they ever come? To be this late, something serious, damned serious, had happened. Gannon, Killraine, Evelyn Calhoon, Gannon's wife Irene—outside of the Comanche tribe, they were in a sense the only family he had. His fear was personal, a worry over the safety of those people to whom he was so tightly bound, to whom he owed so much. . . .

He reset the cylinder in his Navy Colt, spun it with a dry clicking sound, got restlessly to his feet. All at once he was eager to get back to Rancho Bravo; surely Calhoon would have word from Sumner or Pueblo by now! He buckled on the Colt, stared off across the enormous camp westward, at the shimmering prairie. All right, he decided. Not tomorrow, but the day after, he would leave —if the Comanches would let him. He would ask them to hold a council and—

Then he saw the wagons.

Like the sails of ships on the vastness of an ocean, their white covers came into view on the horizon: three of them, moving slowly toward the Comanche camp.

"Lord God," Elias whispered, and all at once the weight of fear was gone. For a moment, he stared, legs weak with relief. Then he spun, untethered the fine gelding Black Bull Man had given him, leaped on its back. It snorted, pivoted, and he put it at a dead run through the camp.

"Rancho Bravo!" he yelled as the horse thundered past

Noconah's lodge. "Out there to the west! Rancho Bravo's coming!"

But others had already seen the wagons; a stir went through the camp. As Whitton's horse cleared the outskirts, he heard other riders coming, a stream of Indians, Noconah in the lead, Black Bull not far behind, pouring from the village.

"Rancho Bravo!" Elias whooped again, in sheer joy. He tapped the gelding with the rein end; it found an extra burst of speed, seemed to fly. Even so, it was not fast enough for his impatience: Gannon would be there with those wagons, surely, and Killraine, and now everything was all right, everything was fine—

And now he neared the wagons, saw they were big, high-sided, real freighters, deep, capacious, pulled by teams of oxen, with outriders. And two of those had seen him and the Comanches far behind him, and they put their horses into a run and came to meet them. For a moment, they were only blurs in the dust and heat-shimmer; then, as they approached, he could see them plainly.

Whitton shook his head in disbelief. Then he brought the gelding to a sliding halt. The pair of riders slowed their own mounts, came loping up, reined in, not two yards away.

"Hello, Elias," Hezekiah Devlin said, yellow teeth showing in a grin, but no humor in his pale blue eyes.

And Plumb, his face still battered, nose a puffy monstrosity, did not speak at all, only sat his horse and looked at Whitton with eyes that glowed with hatred.

"You," Elias whispered. There was a pair of seconds, then, when it felt as if his brain had turned to so much salt inside his skull, and there was a sickness in his belly as if it were full of tainted tallow.

"Us," Devlin said, still grinning, long beard whipping in the breeze. "And you. We didn't expect to find you here. You sho' do git around." He sat his saddle in a casual slouch, but his rifle was centered squarely on Whitton's belly. So was Plumb's.

Then Elias's mind began to work again. "What the hell —Whose wagons?"

"Our wagons," Plumb said. "Plumb and Devlin's."

Rage flared in Whitton, fueled by disappointment. "Damn you, I told you—"

"You told us not to bring whiskey to Comanches," Devlin snapped, and the smile was gone. "Useful information; we mighta made a bad mistake if you hadn't poured out that booze, got ourselves in real dutch with the tribe. But there ain't no law that says we can't bring regular trade goods into camp, is there? Or have they done appointed you head chief of the Comanches?"

"Trade goods . . ."

"Sure. Guns, ammo, salt, coffee, sugar, cloth, all the things your Rancho Bravo was supposed to furnish and ain't." He jerked his thumb. "Wagon loaded with it. And not a swallow of firewater anywhere in there."

Whitton shook his head. "There's somethin' rotten here. Where'd you git that stuff? You couldn't have put together another outfit that quick and got it here."

"Why, we didn't have to," Devlin said. "It was already on the way, three days behind the whiskey. Not bound for the Comanches, we aimed to take it up to Kiowa country. But we changed our plans. Anyhow, we didn't have as far to go as you counted on when you and that one-handed reb turned us loose." His laugh was like the squeak of a rusty hinge. "An ill wind blows nobody any good, Elias. We lost our booze, yeah, but you put us on to a bigger killin' than we could have made with that, anyhow. A lot bigger killin'."

"Meanin' what?"

"Don't be impatient," Plumb said. "You find out soon enough." He raised his rifle. "You goan pay for that beatin' you give me, black boy. You gonna pay ten times over and keep on payin'—"

"Ease off," Devlin snapped. "The big dogs are comin' up, now. No gunplay, no rough stuff." Then, as the Indians approached, he put his horse in motion, rode forward, right hand up, palm out. "*Hau*, Noconah," he said.

Chapter Ten

ELIAS WHITTON WATCHED as Noconah reined in his mount, his face expressionless as his eyes raked over Devlin, shuttled to Plumb. When the chief spoke, his voice was cool. "*Hau,* Hairface, Many Kills."

Devlin's smile remained in place. "You don't seem happy to see us."

"I tell you true, I'm not. Years ago, you were told to leave the People and not come back."

"I remember." Devlin's Comanche was as fluent as Elias's. "But that was a misunderstanding. Yes, Many Kills and I made a mistake: we should have brought more goods, less firewater. But we've learned since then. And we know what the People need, now. There's no firewater in those wagons. Come and look, all of you."

Noconah nodded, spoke to the other leading men who followed him. Devlin issued orders; his men opened the wagon tarps, dropped the tailgates, and the Indians crowded around, making sounds of astonishment . . . and greed. Elias, peering over their heads, did not blame them: the wagons almost overflowed with bounty. Plumb and Devlin, climbing into them, held it up for all to see: Henry rifles and Spencer repeaters, new and gleaming; Colt revolvers, not cap-and-ball, but converted to take metallic cartridges, the first Elias had ever seen like that. And blankets, cloth, coffee, sugar, knives, hatchets, pots and pans, powder, lead, strap iron for making tools and arrow points, beads and looking glasses—all the white man's innovations that had become part of the Comanche

way of life and of which they had been deprived for years. Even Noconah's mouth dropped open, his eyes glittered. Elias forced a way through the crowd to bring his mount up beside the chief's.

Standing in the rear of the lead wagon, Devlin looked down at him, still with that mocking grin. Then Noconah asked, "Hairface? You want to trade with us?"

"No," Devlin said. "I don't want to trade with you."

Whitton stared, and Noconah's mouth snapped shut. "Then why—?"

Devlin's grin broadened. When he spoke, his voice rang out loud and clear, audible to everyone. "The things in these wagons aren't for sale! I didn't come here to trade!" He paused, then flung his arms out wide in an expansive gesture. "I *give* everything in these wagons to the People! Because the heart of Hairface and Many Kills is good, I make a present of all this to the Comanches!"

For a moment, save for the flapping of the wagon tarps, there was silence. Then a great shout of excitement rose from the crowd. Before it died, Elias understood. "Noconah—"

But the chief was already pushing his horse closer to the wagon, eyes narrowed. "Hairface, I don't understand. These goods are worth a fortune. Why should you make such a present to the People?"

"Don't you want them?" Devlin asked ironically.

"Yes, but—" Elias had already comprehended the dimensions of the trap Devlin was setting; now Noconah also scented it. He was too wise to think a man like Devlin would offer so much for nothing in return. And, of course, if the Comanches accepted, they would have to make him a gift of some sort equally impressive.

Devlin read his disbelief. "All right. It's true, I do want a favor from the People. But it's one which will cost them nothing. Is your hunt over? Are there enough leading men in camp to call a council here and now?"

Noconah surveyed the crowd, then nodded. "Yes. The head chiefs of all the bands are here, and most of the

younger important men, and, of course, the old, wise men do not hunt any longer."

"Then we can have it here and now, can't we?" Devlin asked.

Again Noconah looked around. He read the greed and urgency on the faces of his people. "Yes, that's possible." He glanced at Elias, and Whitton saw the conflicting emotions on his face. Elias nodded. *Well to have it over with, get it in the open.*

"Fine," Devlin said. "We'll pull the wagons around to make some shade. Plumb! Break out the tobacco, plenty for everybody!"

Elias touched Noconah's arm. "I want to talk to you."

Noconah nodded. "Set your wagons in place, Hairface. We'll talk in a few minutes." Then he wheeled his horse, shoved it out of the crowd, and Elias followed.

Alone together a few yards out on the prairie, Whitton said, "Listen. I know what he's going to ask the council for."

Noconah nodded gravely. "Of course, so do I. And I don't know what to do about it." He lapsed into English. "Dammit, 'Lias, what can I do? What's Rancho Bravo given us? Thirty rifles, thirty pistols, and nothing else—and you saw what's in those wagons!"

"And you know what happens if he gets what he wants," Elias said. "I don't mean right now, it's not Rancho Bravo I'm thinking of. I mean a year from now, two, five, when the Army's back out here and—"

"I know," Noconah said. "But what can I do?" His face darkened with anger. "When you came with that handful of guns, I told you, I could go no further for you. I was hoping by now you'd at least have some word, if not the wagons and the goods themselves. But . . . you've left me high and dry. You know our saying: meat in the lodge is worth more than all the hoofprints on the whole Llano Estacado!" He paused. "What do you think he'll ask for?"

"Exclusive trading rights with the Comanches," Elias said.

"And not for us to move against Rancho Bravo?"

"Why should he? Once he's got the exclusive trading rights, there's no way you can persuade the People that Rancho Bravo's any further use to them. He'll let nature take its course, then. Black Bull's faction will have the upper hand and you won't have any way to stop 'em. They'll come in and wipe us out, if we don't pull out first. And, like you say, you're high and dry, no way to stop 'em."

Noconah stared down at his hands on the bridle rein. "You've made a lot of talk with Black Bull. Haven't you changed his mind? He's powerfully in your debt."

"We're quits," Elias said. "I told him so. And I haven't made a dent in him. Not that I can see. Noconah, I'm not speaking for myself, but for the People. Don't get mixed up with Plumb and Devlin. You know damned well what they'll do. No matter what they promise, they'll bring firewater in, and there are enough whiskey-chiefs to let 'em get away with it. They'll rob the People blind, make drunks like the Kaws and Tonkawas out of 'em; and more than that. They'll take over Rancho Bravo. We can't drive that fifteen hundred head back to East Texas, we've got no land there. He'll take over our ranch and cattle, too. But will he speak for you with the Army when it comes, and if he does, will his word carry any weight? You know as well as I do, he'll sell you out, that's what he'll do."

"I know all that," Noconah answered grimly. "But my hands are tied." He relaxed a trifle ."I'll point this out in council, as far as I dare go. But, in the long run, it's up to the council itself. Each man will speak and— If it goes in favor of Plumb and Devlin, there is nothing else I can do."

Elias drew in a deep breath. "I'm not a chief or subchief. But I'll have a chance to speak, too?"

"Of course. We owe you that much."

"I guess there's no more I can ask." Elias turned his horse. "Well, he's moved his wagons and they're waiting for us. We'd best ride in."

The chiefs, subchiefs, medicine men, and elders whose

experience was respected and whose advice was valued sat in a rough semicircle in the shade cast by the high-hooped wagon tarps. Lesser tribesmen watched the horses and looked on curiously, as did Plumb and Devlin's men, on the outskirts. Noconah, as head chief, took place facing the others, and he made room for Elias on one side of him, Devlin on the other. Plumb squatted on his heels, not far away, his broken face impassive, his eyes shining with hatred when they encountered Whitton's.

The preliminaries were lengthy. Noconah's ceremonial pipe had been brought out by a messenger; there was the usual ritual at the opening of an important council, the smoking and the praying. Devlin took part in it as naturally as did Elias Whitton, and with the same patience.

Then Noconah arose. "Hairface," he said, "has promised us a great gift, but he has a favor we must grant in return. I do not know what his favor is. I think we should listen to Hairface first."

Devlin's beard whipped in the wind as he rose. Despite his white man's slouch hat, his filthy buckskins, and his stooped and skinny frame, his bearing was infused with the dignity worthy of an important council. He began to speak, and floridly, with the rolling, expansive oratory so dear to the Comanche heart.

Smoothly, plausibly, he began with praise of the People as the greatest, wisest, most powerful tribe he had ever met in all his wanderings. He reminded them of how he and his partner, Many Kills, had for years traded with the Comanches, lived among them, learned their ways. Then misunderstandings had arisen, and the war had come; and Plumb and Devlin had gone elsewhere and had been away from the Comanches far too long.

But now they were back. And to show how much they admired and loved the People, they had brought these wagons loaded with goods. And they would present all this to the People as a gift, if the People would grant one small favor in return. He paused, and those pale blue eyes swept the council. "I offer all this to you, the Noconahs, Quahadi, Needle People, the three great bands of the Comanches. And I do not want your robes or horses or

gold. I ask only one small favor. I want the right from now on to trade with you, to bring you the things you need and sell them at a fair price. And . . ." His raspy voice went hard and firm ". . . *I want to be the only one with the right to do that!*"

Noconah was on his feet. "Hairface—"

"Just give me your word," Devlin said. "That you'll trade with no one but Plumb and Devlin from now on. And everything in these wagons is the People's."

"That's not so easy," Noconah said. "We have made a bargain with Dark Rider and Rancho Bravo. They have the first rights to trade."

Devlin nodded. "I know all about Rancho Bravo. And I tell you now, Rancho Bravo's no more than the shadow of a cloud on the ground. It has come and it will go, and nobody will be affected by its passing."

Elias Whitton jumped to his feet, strode forward. "That's a lie! Rancho Bravo is here to stay, and it'll see that the People get everything they need and—"

"Will it, now?" Devlin answered. "And what has it given the People so far?" He turned to Noconah. "What?"

Noconah licked his lips. "Very little, but—"

"But there'll be more," Whitton snapped. "When our wagons get back from Colorado—"

Plumb's short, loud, explosive laugh cut him off. "What wagons?" Elias whirled, to face the squatting, enormous figure in the Charro clothes. Plumb's split and battered face was an ugly mask of triumph. "There ain't gonna be no wagons from Colorado," Plumb said joyfully. "Ain't you heard, Elias? Your Colorado outfit's plumb wiped out. Gone, finished, dead as hell."

Elias stared at him, frozen. Then he was aware of Devlin's words in Comanche, repeating what Plumb had said, adding: "Many Kills is right. The People can forget Rancho Bravo. All the money they made and all the goods they had have been taken from them by other white men, and the Rancho Bravo chiefs who went to Colorado have all been killed. So you'll get nothing from Rancho Bravo, nothing at all. But that doesn't matter. Plumb and Devlin will bring you everything you need."

Elias Whitton stood there, immobilized by shock, and, for half a minute, his mind refused to work. From what seemed to be a long way off, a voice whispered, "Devlin, you lie." It was his own.

"No." Devlin was no longer mocking, only triumphant. In English, he fired the words like bullets. "You're done for, all right, Whitton. The news reached Santa Fe from Sumner just before these wagons pulled out. Your men sold the herd in Colorado, okay, and they got a pile of money for it. But a bandit outfit, the Lawrence gang, hit 'em north of Raton Pass. Wiped 'em out, all of 'em, took the money and the goods. That's why your wagons haven't come, and that's why they'll never come." Then, quickly, he repeated that in Comanche.

Elias turned, saw Noconah staring at him with dismay and pity. The chief believed; after all, what good would it do Devlin to lie and have Rancho Bravo come in unexpectedly to prove him a liar?

Then the shock passed and Whitton's mind was working again, and he controlled himself again, then went on the attack, voice full of harsh conviction, for he knew what he said was true. "I don't care what news reached Santa Fe. I know Henry Gannon and Phil Killraine and I know there ain't any bandit gang that ever lived that could do that to those two men, not and wipe 'em out. Maybe that's what they say in Santa Fe, but what they say in Santa Fe is wrong."

Devlin shrugged, unruffled. "You don't know the Lawrence outfit, Whitton. I do. They're a bunch of mountain men, a whole damned family of 'em. They make your Rancho Bravo outfit look like ladies at a tea party. They could eat up *two* Rancho Bravos any time they take a notion, and still come back for more!"

Whitton sucked in breath, turned to Noconah. "I need time. Time to get back to Rancho Bravo, find out how much of this is true or false. I'm asking for that much time, just a few more days. By the time I get there, messengers we sent north should be back. Six days, that's

what I need. Three to get there, three to send back word to you."

"What word could you send back?" Devlin gibed.

"Either that you're right or that you're wrong," Whitton snapped. "If you're right, of course the People have no choice. They'll have to take Devlin's offer and I won't try to stop them. But if Devlin's wrong and the goods will be here before you go into winter camp, I'll send that word and you can count on it—and I'll ask you to hold to our bargain. Just six days, Noconah."

The chief frowned, and before he could speak, Devlin snapped, "Wait!" He faced Noconah and the council. "There's something else I didn't get a chance to say. Plumb and I are poor men and we've got to make a living. We can't afford to wait any longer while Whitton leads the People around by the nose. For the People's own good and for ours, I'm laying down one more condition. Either you accept our offer now, this minute, or . . . much as we hate to, we'll have to take it back. Everything in those wagons is yours if you say yes. You'll take it, right this minute. But if we have to wait six days for you to decide— We can't afford it. We'll have to roll these wagons out and find another tribe to trade with—the Kiowas, maybe, or the Cheyennes." He paused. "It's up to you. Plumb and Devlin and goods you can feel and see and touch, or Dark Rider and more promises like wind. But you'll have to make the decision right now."

Noconah's face darkened. "You're pushing us too hard, Hairface."

"For your own good," Devlin said.

Noconah looked at the wagons, at the men in council, then at Elias. Heavily, he said, "All right. It's a matter for the council to decide, but I'm going to speak first." He faced the council. He had clearly made up his own mind already, and Whitton felt a kind of warmth as Noconah talked for a long time, persuasively. "And now," he ended, "it comes down to this: we must choose between the words of a member of the People or the deeds of Hairface and Many Kills. We know Dark Rider, and we know these others, too. And because I *know* these others—" his

lip curled "—I say that I am for Dark Rider. I think the People do not need Hairface or Many Kills or their goods, even if Rancho Bravo cannot deliver. The goods are coming west again. One way or another, there will be other traders. And we can also find some things we need in Mexico if we raid deep enough." He paused. "Every man sitting here in this council has the right to speak." He took from his waistband two buckskin thongs, made a knot in one. "This is for Dark Rider; the other for Hairface. As you speak, I will count."

Then they began, the orations of the council members. Noconah's prestige was enormous, and Quanah, too, rose to speak for Whitton—or at least against Plumb and Devlin. It went on and on, and, standing there, Elias felt sweat running down his flanks in streams. Devlin and Plumb stared at him coldly, both men tense. But now there were four knots in the string for Rancho Bravo and none for Plumb and Devlin.

But then the tide began to turn. Devlin was far from being without support. For some, their glimpse of those trade goods was like a look into the promised land; others had a darker motivation, the whiskey-chiefs, the liquor addicts, who knew or hoped that if Devlin gained a toehold, whiskey would surely follow.

And now there were five knots in Devlin's thong and only four in Rancho Bravo's, and Devlin was grinning once again; and Noconah said, "Black Bull. It's your turn to speak."

The young Comanche did not even raise his head. As if lost in thought, he said, "Pass me by. I'll speak later."

So five more talked; and Devlin's smile began to fade. Because again the tide shifted, and when the last man sat down, there were seven knots in each thong.

And, Elias realized, only Black Bull was left; only he had not voted. Noconah called his name. "Are you ready to talk, now?"

"Yes." Black Bull stood up and walked out into the open, little bells jingling on his ankles. He looked from Devlin to Elias without expression, faced the council.

Elias felt the pounding of blood in his wrists. Well, if Black Bull wanted to rub out Rancho Bravo, all he had to do now was say the word. A vote for Devlin and the rest would be inevitable.

Black Bull said, "For a long time, I have hated Rancho Bravo and everything it stands for. This is our country, not white man's country, and I don't think there is room for anything like Rancho Bravo in it. I think it was a mistake for them to come and I think it would be a mistake to allow them to stay."

Noconah's face was grim; unconsciously his fingers began to make a knot in Devlin's thong.

"But," Black Bull said, "if I must choose between Rancho Bravo and that Hairface there, I choose Rancho Bravo. I know that Hairface and how his mind works; once I was forced to live with another Hairface just like him who made me call him Father. And I know that sooner or later, dealing with him will mean this: the People will be cheated, and when he's sure of his position, he'll bring in his rotten whiskey, and too many of us will drink it and care for nothing else and then we'll be like Tonkawas or Kaws. No. I say give Dark Rider the time he asks for and let Devlin and Plumb take their goods wherever they want to—but out of Comanche territory! That's what I say. I have spoken." And without looking at Elias, he sat down.

But Devlin was on his feet, face contorted, and Plumb was up, too, glowering at Elias. "Noconah," Devlin chopped the air with his hand, "you can't — Damn it, you're throwing away a fortune!"

Noconah smiled grimly, holding up the two thongs. "The council has spoken, Hairface. Roll your wagons. Take them off Comanche land. You'll not be bothered—as long as you're traveling on."

"I—" Devlin opened his mouth, looked into Noconah's eyes, clamped it shut, his face above his beard red as turkey wattles. "Come on, Plumb," he snapped. "You heard the chief! Let's git these wagons rollin'!"

Plumb rose, walked across in front of the council. He halted, looking down at Whitton. "It ain't over yet," he

said. "Jest remember that." Then he moved on, swung up on his mount.

As the bullwhackers prodded their yoked teams into motion, Noconah turned to Whitton. "I hope the news you find at Rancho Bravo's good. I hope those two lied. For both our sakes. Because this is going to be a hard thing to explain to the People. I think you'd better ride as soon as you can. You don't have time to waste." He looked at Plumb and Devlin riding alongside the rolling wagons, Devlin spewing curses at teamsters and oxen alike. "And you'd better take some men with you. You're too valuable to everybody to risk those two doubling back and looking for you."

"I'll ask Bear Gut and a couple of others to ride with me, and either send word back by them or come myself."

"Good luck," Noconah said.

Elias thanked him and started for his horse. Black Bull Man was just swinging up on his own mount, and Whitton signaled to him. Black Bull reined around.

"I owe you some thanks," Elias said.

Black Bull looked down at him without expression. "You owe me nothing. If there are two bad things, a man chooses the one that's least bad. I said what I believed -- including how I feel about Rancho Bravo. I despise everything about Hairface and Many Kills and their firewater. But that doesn't mean I've changed my mind about anything else." Then, in English, he added, "You're a damned long way from being off the hook." And he wheeled his mount and rode away.

They pushed their horses hard, Elias Whitton and his two companions, Bear Gut, his jovial former brother-in-law and Heavy Shield, another warrior with whom Elias had often hunted and raided. But not too fast to keep careful watch; like Noconah, Whitton knew Plumb and Devlin too well to expect them to accept defeat without striking back.

Twilight found them, without incident along the way, entering a brushy draw through which ran a thread of water. Hobbling their horses, they spread their robes, un-

packed the roasted ribs they had carried with them, ate and smoked. Bear Gut, as was his wont, entertained them with one funny, obscene story after another. But the heavyset Comanche was more than a clown; he had a towering reputation as a warrior, and he had not earned it with his facility at telling dirty jokes. Presently he grew strangely restless, and Elias understood. Bear Gut could not sleep without making a final scout. "I think I'll take a look around," he said, picking up his rifle. He stood not much over five and a half feet and he weighed nearly two hundred pounds; yet, he was as light and soundless as a shadow, gliding down the draw, through the brush along the stream. Whitton and Heavy Shield waited in silence, weapons at hand, for his return.

And then, fifteen minutes later, he was there, materializing from the dark. Elias knew at once that something was wrong. He came up, rifle in hand.

Bear Gut's voice was a whisper. "There are some people down the creek a quarter of a mile. Two, anyhow, and they're not Indians. They're holed up in deep brush, but I saw tracks of shod horses."

Whitton's hand stroked the barrel of his gun. "Plumb," he said. "Devlin. Noconah was right. They doubled back, struck our trail. They're waitin' till we're asleep to hit us. All right. We'll hit 'em first. Bear Gut?"

"We'll do it this way," said the Indian, who had reconnoitered the terrain. "Elias, you go down the left bank; Heavy Shield, you take the right. I'll follow the creek. You'll see a big thicket where the draw widens. They're in there, and their horses, too. There'll be nothing to it. We can just rake the brush with our guns from three sides; they haven't got a chance. Elias, a dove call. Heavy Shield, you answer with the cricket. When I hear the cricket, I'll give the coyote bark and we'll open fire. All right?"

"All right," Elias said. "Let's move out."

The three of them scattered. Elias, moving down the left bank, took advantage of every scrap of cover. *That Devlin,* he thought. *Like a snapping turtle. He don't give up. . . .* Along the Nueces, they said that once a snapping

turtle seized you, it wouldn't let go until it thundered. *Well, we'll give him some thunder, right enough. . . .*

Then he was in position. Down there in the draw, he saw the dark blot that was the thicket. He eased up to the bank's edge, settled down, with a perfect field of fire to rake the brush. With three guns pouring lead in there, nothing could escape; at the very least, a fusillade would flush Plumb and Devlin into the open. He licked his lips. Then he gave the sleepy, murmuring sound of a desert dove settling for the night.

From across the draw, there came a faint chirr: a fiddling cricket.

At that instant, a yellow light flared up in the thicket: a kindled fire. Whitton gaped. Then the coyote barked from the brush along the creek.

Elias Whitton screamed, "Don't shoot! Heavy Shield, Bear Gut, hold your fire!" He yelled the words in Comanche, and then in English bellowed: "You down there, you're covered! Who are you?"

There was a moment's silence. "Elias?" a voice called then. "Elias Whitton?"

The rifle trembled in Whitton's hands. If they hadn't lit that fire, something Plumb and Devlin would never have done—"It's me!" he yelled. "Bear Gut, Heavy Shield, don't shoot! These are Rancho Bravo men!" Then he was sliding down the bank, crashing through the brush. "Loosh," he said, his voice still shaky as he broke into a little clearing by the stream. "For God's sake—"

They stared at him, Lucius Calhoon and Hill, and only then did Whitton remember that they had never seen him like this, in loin cloth and moccasins, with feathers in his hair. Calhoon's face was astonished, then relieved, and he lowered the rifle he held left-handed.

"Judas Priest," Elias whispered, "but that was close. Loosh— What you doin' here?"

"Looking for the Comanche camp—and you," Calhoon said. "Thought you'd have to know as quick as we could tell you." He tipped back the battered Confederate cavalry hat perched on his head. "Elias, the Colorado wagons are finally coming in."

Chapter Eleven

DOWN THE CANYON, below the fort, the smokes of thirty Comanche lodges drifted skyward, as Black Bull Man's followers and their families roasted Rancho Bravo beef. Inside the building, its door locked for the moment and its windows shuttered so their voices would not carry, Elias Whitton and Loosh Calhoon faced the Rancho Bravo men.

"Now, you've got to understand," Calhoon said, repeating what Elias had told him. "This is a different kind of visit from any the Comanches have paid us before. This is the first time they've brought their women and children, and it's the first time they'll have been here for more than an afternoon. But this time they'll probably be here at least a week and maybe longer, depending on when the wagons get here. And that's going to call for some special carefulness where we're concerned."

"That is pure gospel," Elias put in. "Thirty lodges—that's over a hundred Injuns, all told. And you got to count on them being underfoot a lot and in your hair, especially the women and kids. What you got to remember is that most of these Comanches, especially the women and children, don't know anything about how white men live at all. And don't let nobody tell you different: when an Injun comes on something new, he's as curious as a pet coon. So they'll be into everything and anything, and likely they'll make considerable pests of theirselves. But they don't mean no harm, and you got to pay no mind to 'em—just grin and bear it. Don't cause

no explosions. And when the wagons git here, they'll pack up all the Comanche goods and be gone, to deliver 'em to the rest of the tribe. You can stand it that long."

"Damn well told we can," Pitt grinned. "What with us fixing finally to git paid off, so we can head for the bright lights. Me, I aim to keep my hair at least until I finish a high lonesome up in Pueblo or Denver!"

Calhoon grinned. "Right. The girls'll like you better that way." Then he was serious. "Well, does everybody understand? You use your common sense and walk soft and everything's gonna come out fine. When they get here, the men from Colorado'll take over and it'll be your turn to howl, with plenty of gold to jingle in your pockets. Now, you're dismissed, go on about your work."

"Sho," Pitt said, unbarred the door and swung it open. The men filed out, their talk excited, tatters of it drifting back, as Elias and Calhoon stood there grinning. "My God," one said. "Them Colorado women better watch my smoke! Hell, first time I see a female, I'm liable to rope and earmark her before I notice she ain't got four tits!"

Somebody giggled lewdly. "Mebbe we can practice up on these squaws! They tell me that Injun stuff is downright prime!"

Whitton was through the door and in the yard and on the man in three paces, like a hawk seizing a jackrabbit. Barney Dunn reeled as a big, black hand spun him around. "What the hell?"

Elias, enraged, stared down into the red, bearded face. "Listen, you!" he whispered hoarsely. "And all the rest, you hear me! Git this straight, Dunn! You touch a Comanche woman and these Injuns'll draw and quarter you alive! And, by damn, I'll help 'em! Because we got it locked now, ever'thing's all right—but that's the one thing that can still blow the whole shebang sky high and cost all of us our scalps! You keep your hands off Comanche women, and you keep your rotten mouth off 'em, too!"

Dunn's bluster faded. "I was jest jokin'—"

"Well, you can joke us all plumb to death! There's

enough Comanches understand English that you'd better keep your mouth shut!" He let Dunn go. "You hear me? You mind your business and your mouth and hands! You've done had one round with Black Bull Man, you won't be so lucky if you have another!"

Dunn dropped his eyes, turned away. "Hell," he mumbled and shuffled off.

"Pitt!" Calhoon snapped. "Take Dunn away from the cook. I don't want him around this place while these Comanches are here! Send him out on the range, every day, and make damned sure he keeps away from the Comanches."

Pitt nodded, hard face grave. "That's exactly what I figured on, Cap'n Calhoon." He turned to the others. "You have heard the man. Now, let's git on about our business and watch ourselves. And watch Dunn, too. Me, I don't aim to shed my hair on his account."

When they had gone, Calhoon let out a gusty breath. "Six, eight more days, Elias. You reckon we can make it? More than a hundred Comanches here on Rancho Bravo, waitin' for the wagons, and all these rawhide Texans?"

"Why," Elias said, "sure we'll make it. *Tejanos* nor Comanches either don't wear no horns and drag forked tails." He smiled. "That's why I set it up this way. It's good medicine for both sides. The first real chance they've had to git to know each other, except a bunch of Injuns dashin' in and dashin' out again. And they got to know each other. Because there ain't no other way Rancho Bravo can come through."

Six, eight more days, Elias thought, drinking coffee while Calhoon worked on the daily log he kept. *Nothing to it, now.* His mind went back to that night in the brushy draw, and the impact of Calhoon's words on him.

"The wagons—" he had said. His knees felt weak. "They're really comin'? Henry Gannon, Phil, they're all right? I mean, Plumb and Devlin showed up in the Comanche camp today and they had a fool story about the outfit bein' wiped out."

"Not such a fool story," Calhoon said. "That's why

we rode like hell to find you when we got the news. But it's okay, everything's okay. It was a damned close thing, and Gannon's crippled up some and we lost some men. But Phil Killraine saved our bacon, and the wagons are leavin' Fort Sumner about now, with plenty of riders. Ten, twelve days at the outside and they'll be here with the money—lots of it—and the goods."

Before Elias could ask more questions, Bear Gut and Heavy Shield came in. The fire was fed and they all sat around it, and Calhoon told the story; and as he did, Elias understood. Devlin had indeed heard that the Colorado train had been wiped out, but what Devlin had heard was wrong.

The herd had reached Pueblo in Colorado Territory safely. Killraine as business manager had sold its seventeen hundred head there for more than a hundred dollars an animal on the hoof. Whitton's mind whirled, trying to comprehend the sum Phil had earned by out-pokering greedy buyers, trying to comprehend, as well, that a quarter of it was his, that he, former slave, Comanche warrior, was suddenly one of the richest men in Texas! He couldn't; he would think about it later.

"Devlin had it partly right," Calhoon continued. "Headed home with the money and the goods, the train did get hit by the Lawrence gang. But they made one bad mistake. They didn't get Phil Killraine."

He'd been out on scout when the raiders struck. Fighting his way back, he'd found the money stolen, the outriders killed, Gannon shot through both legs and left for dead.

"But the women, Evelyn and Irene Gannon, they were safe; and the wagons. All the Lawrences wanted was the gold. So Phil saw Henry and the train safe in Trinidad and rode back up into the Rockies to get the money back—single-handed. He sent a messenger on to tell us what happened, but either the Apaches got him or he dogged it, because he never showed. Anyhow, Phil roused some miners and the Vigilance Committee in Pueblo, and they wiped out the whole Lawrence gang, hung what they couldn't shoot, and got our money back. Then he

returned to Trinidad, hired on some more men, and soon as Henry was fit to travel, struck out. Hill and Roland met the outfit just south of Raton Pass, got the story, lit a shuck back. We didn't waste a minute passin' the word along; I decided to find you myself. Lord, Elias, we've sweated goose eggs wonderin' if you were gonna be able to hold the Comanches back. With no more guns and ammo than we were left with—"

"I know," Whitton said. "And don't think it ain't been as close as a town shave with a barber's razor. But it ought to be all right, now." Then he told Calhoon about Plumb and Devlin.

The Carolinian's face went hard. "Bastards. We *should* have hung 'em from a wagon tongue! Maybe there's still time to do that!"

"No," Elias said. "It would just stir up trouble. Let's leave well enough alone. . . ."

That had been four days ago. Now, down-canyon, drums were beating. Elias went to the door to listen, and Calhoon closed his log book and joined him. "I hope that singing means they're peaceable."

"It does," Elias said.

"I'll have to take your word for it. But I wish Noconah had sent somebody besides Black Bull Man and his outfit to receive the guns and goods, when Bear Gut carried the word back."

"Noconah knew what he was doing," Elias said. "Noconah always does." After a moment, he went on. "He sent Black Bull and his people here to receive the goods to keep us honest. If this was one more stall, one more play for time, he could count on Black Bull to find it out. And do what he thought best."

"Rub us out," Calhoon said.

"Sure," Elias answered. "But if we told the truth—Well, it won't hurt Black Bull to see that there's some honest white men."

"He knows now we've told the truth. His scouts have seen the wagons for themselves."

"Right. He can't move against us now. But that don't

mean he won't try it another time." Elias turned. "Loosh, while we got the chance, we got to use it."

"What chance?"

"To win Black Bull over. He'll be here another week. And . . . He needs talk, lots of talk. He needs things explained. I've had a chance to see inside him on the hunt, and . . . Loosh, those years with the whites changed him more than he'll admit. He needs things, the kind of things he can't git from the People. He can't help it, his mind just works different from theirs. It's full of ideas, all sorts of ideas gnawin' at him that Indians can't even understand. And that makes him feel like an outsider and he tries to make up for it by bein' double-Comanche, and I think it's drivin' him a little crazy. He's just outgrown the Comanche way of life, and he won't admit it even to himself."

Calhoon's gray eyes flared with interest. "I see what you're driving at. And you think that if he can find whatever he's looking for here with us, it will change his attitude, at least a little?"

"I think this, that there ain't nothin' more important to Rancho Bravo than to try. And what he craves, the kind of talk, ideas, he's hungry for, you and later on Killraine could give him, because you two have been around, seen the world, know how it works better'n me or Henry Gannon. You know about the things he wants to learn, maybe have some answers for the kinda questions always botherin' him."

"Maybe," Calhoon said. "I could try. He interests me, anyhow. I'd like to get to know him better."

"Then try to. See if you can git inside his guard, make him talk to you. Only, remember this: he's a smart man and a powerful one, you can't hand him no horse shit. And don't ever lie to him, because he can smell a lie further'n you can shoot a gun."

Calhoon nodded. "Sure. But . . . how do we get this thing started?"

"Come on with me." Elias grinned. "We'll stroll down through his camp and pay a little call. Git there just at dinner time and he'll have to ask us in to eat."

Three days passed, four; and Elias Whitton indulged in self-congratulations. It was working better, all of it, than he'd dared hope.

He was filled with admiration for the way Calhoon had got past the haughtiness and pride of Black Bull's defenses. Like an angler dangling bait, Calhoon had asked provocative questions about Comanche life and thought. Despite himself, Black Bull could not help explaining. Calhoon listened with full attention, asked more questions, argued back. Soon the two of them were in debate, and Black Bull was asking questions, too. Recognizing in the aristocratic Southerner a man of background, experience, with a mind as wide-ranging and as quick as his own, words began to pour from him. That first night, Elias had moved on and left them talking; and it was very late when Calhoon returned to the fort. He and Black Bull had sat up, deep in conversation, until long after the rest of the camp had gone to sleep.

From then on, they were together much, Calhoon and Black Bull Man, and Whitton sat in, too, when he could, himself fascinated and learning from the interplay of minds. If nothing else, Loosh was making Rancho Bravo's case and Black Bull listened.

But Whitton had little time to spend with them; he was too busy seeing that oil and water mixed, that Texans and Comanches lived together without friction; and that was a full-time job.

For this week, the range riding was slacked off, though Pitt and Calhoon made sure Barney Dunn was always off the home ranch, and white men and red began to mingle and learn and understand one another's ways, at least a little.

Shrewdly, Elias used horsemanship as a common meeting ground. Both Texans and Comanches were superb horsemen, but in wholly different ways. Elias staged demonstrations of Comanche riding and training, followed them with others Texas-style, and contests, at first rather grim and suspicious, then better-natured as each side scored some triumphs and began having fun. Soon Texans

and Indians were swapping mounts, trying each other's style of riding, learning a little of each other's language, finding that, though they were very different, they shared a common measure of manhood.

Comanches could use reatas, too, but not with the uncanny skill of professional cowmen, and Rancho Bravo roping left them open-mouthed in wonder; but it was the other way around when the Indians showed what they could do with bows and arrows.

Nevertheless, arguments flared inevitably: Whitton made it his business to be on hand to settle them, and none was ever really serious. Most miraculous of all was that none were over women.

The Rancho Bravo riders had gone months now without even seeing a human female, red or white; his dread was that the presence of so many women would tempt some Texan irresistibly. After all, though many Comanche wives were haggard, workworn and ugly, others, especially Sun Woman, Black Bull's wife, were real beauties by any standard.

But there had been no incidents. The Texans knew all too well how outnumbered and outgunned they were and what would surely happen if a fight erupted. Also, payday and furlough, sprees in Colorado or even Santa Fe, were not far off, now. In addition, the Comanche women were rather shy, keeping mostly to themselves.

Except for Sun Woman. A curious combination of innocence and arrogance, there was no shyness in her. As a chief's wife, she went where she chose when she pleased, not forward or flirtatious in her manner, but curious and inquiring, and absolutely secure in the belief that her husband's prestige protected her.

It did, of course, and so, too, did the fact that Texans recognized a lady when they met one, red or white; and Sun Woman was undeniably a lady. Nevertheless, she worried Whitton. She was, he thought, so damned good-looking, and that straight-forwardness of hers might be mistaken for something else by some randy cowhand. And he did not much care for her habit of taking a morning ride on her gaily painted and feather-ornamented little

spotted pony. It was all right when Black Bull or some other brave rode with her, but Black Bull spent almost all his time with Calhoon then, and more than once Elias had seen Sun Woman riding out alone.

It was not something he dared talk to the chief about, but Smoke Rising had come with the others and her lodge was pitched down-canyon. Whitton met her one night in the darkness under the cottonwoods.

"Do me a favor, will you?" he asked. "Have a talk with Sun Woman for me. Tell her not to ride out by herself the way she does."

"You think it's dangerous?"

"I hope not, but I don't want to take any chances. It's one thing when she's around the men with everybody watching, but it might be another if one of them met her out there with nobody around. I don't think there's a one who'd lay a finger on her, but I don't want to take any chances. Anyhow, speak to her, will you? Tell her either to take a man along or a few other women or not to go."

Smoke Rising hesitated. "All right, I'll speak to her. But don't expect her to listen. She listens to no one but Black Bull and not always to him. And it makes him angry if other men ride with her. And, as for women—Well, she's not liked among the women. She's too good-looking and too proud. You'd think Black Bull was the only man who'd ever stolen a horse or killed an enemy . . ." Her voice softened. "But if it's important to you, I'll do my best."

"It *is* important."

"So is something else." Her voice was melancholy. "Dark Rider, we've been here five days, and still you haven't come to my lodge at night."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. The other men wouldn't understand, not after they've been told to stay away from the women. They'd see me sharing your robes and think, *If he can do it, why can't I?* No, we'll have to sleep apart while you're here."

"And when I leave? We'll go into winter camp, then, and it may be months before you and I see one another again."

"That's not a thought that pleasures me, either. But—" Then the words came from him involuntarily. "But it doesn't have to be that way. Smoke Rising, when they move on, why don't you stay here?"

He felt her tense beneath his hand on her waist. "Stay—You mean—"

"As my woman. My wife. We'll go through the Comanche ceremony and then we'll have the white man's wedding, too, later on."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, that would be—" Then she caught her breath. "But to leave the People. And I know so little American talk. And there'll be white women here soon, and what will they think?"

Whitton smiled, something singing in him now, an old grief dying, an old wound healing. "You won't leave the People. We'll still go on the spring and fall hunts and be with them sometimes in between. You can learn the talk, easily—and the kind of women Calhoon and Gannon are married to will be glad to have you here. Smoke Rising, what do you say?"

A moment's hesitation, while he held his breath. Then: "I say, yes, Dark Rider," and she pressed herself against him. He held her tightly and everything else was forgotten, then, Rancho Bravo, trade goods, Sun Woman, all. . . .

"Elias," Calhoon said, "I wouldn't ask it if things weren't goin' so damned well. But I can't help it. Those wagons are only a day and a half away on a fast horse, now, and Evelyn's with 'em, and I haven't seen her since San Antonio. . . . I've got to go to her!"

"Sho," Whitton said. "You should have, long ago."

"No, I couldn't. Not with all these Indians here. But, now . . . I think it's safe. I think I've brought Black Bull around."

Whitton stared at him across the table in the fort. "You done that, you've struck a mighty lick for Rancho Bravo!"

"I hope so, anyhow. You sure sized him up right: he was hungry for facts, information, ideas, white man's talk. A lot of things he hadn't understood till now, but I've made him see. He admitted, last night, that he's changed

his mind about Rancho Bravo. If Killraine and Gannon, when he got to know them, stacked up as high as me and you, he said—"

"He'll soon see that . . ."

"Sure. Anyhow, we've hammered it out backwards and forwards and . . . you were right. He's found something here he didn't even know he needed. He told me he wouldn't oppose Rancho Bravo anymore, without giving it a fair chance."

Elias felt a surge of relief, as Calhoon went on. "I told him I wanted to ride out to meet Evelyn, but I didn't dare leave unless I could be sure there wouldn't be any trouble. And he gave me his word that there'd be none from his side anyhow."

"Then you can depend on it." Elias grinned. "Man, what the hell you waitin' for? Why ain't you already in the saddle?"

Calhoon laughed delightedly. "I'm gone!" he said.

Later, Black Bull joined Whitton as Loosh swung up on a feisty little Morgan, threw his maimed right hand in a salute. "See you in three days!" he yelled and spurred the horse and took off at a gallop.

Elias and the Comanche stood there in silence until Calhoon was only a speck in the bright noon sunlight flooding the prairie. Then Black Bull made a sound in his throat. "He loves that woman of his, don't he?"

"Just as much as you love yours," Elias said.

"Jabez Dale used to kick his old lady around. I saw him knock out one of her teeth one time. I always figured that was what love was among the whites." Black Bull paused, still staring at Calhoon's dust, far out there. "Maybe I judged too many people by Jabez Dale and Devlin and Plumb. . . ." He turned to Whitton. "Now, I got to do something that ain't easy for me. After all the big talk I've made in council against Rancho Bravo, I got to turn around, say I was wrong. I know you, I know Calhoon now and . . . Maybe Rancho Bravo is a big thing for the People after all, like a tool we never had before. White men we can get the truth from, instead of acting on rumors and lies and firewater dreams. Men like Loosh

who can hold their own in any council with the soldiers or the politicians to take our side so we can't be fooled. Yeah, you said all that, but I never really understood it until I met Calhoon. He can put things in a way a man can get hold of. Anyhow, unless Rancho Bravo deliberately plays us false someday, I'm going to take a chance on it. . . . Or on you and Loosh and these others when I get to know them."

Whitton masked the emotion he felt by taking out his pipe and tamping it. "We can't ask no more than that, Bull. . . ." He closed his eyes for a moment, as he fumbled for a match. It was, he thought, the end of a long and weary trail. This was the last loose end, and now it was tied up. They had made it here with the cattle; they had sold the herd and got their money; they had built their headquarters; he had found another woman to heal the wound Plumb had inflicted; and now, finally, they were secure with the Comanches. They had met and conquered every obstacle, and now they could get on with building the empire they had planned, not only for themselves but for the People. He felt pride in accomplishment as hot and pleasant as good whiskey's glow coursing through his veins.

They had undertaken an enormous, important venture against overwhelming odds and they had done it. The worst was over, now, and the enormous burden he'd been carrying was gone; he was, really, a free man once more.

"Well, we'll never let you down if we can help it," was all he said.

"I've about decided that," Black Bull smiled, and clapped a lean, strong hand on Whitton's shoulder. "Let's go to my lodge and smoke and then we'll eat."

"Sure," Elias said, and together they walked down the creek through the cottonwoods toward the Comanche camp.

The painted pony stood, head down, jaw bridle trailing, outside the tepee, still wearing its antelope hide saddle. "She must have just come in," Black Bull said. "She didn't tie it and she ought to have unsaddled. Women," he added

fondly. "They understand a lot of things, but horses isn't one of them." He went to the pinto. "Fancy Runner. You and the woman have a nice ride?" Scratching it between the ears, he unsaddled it, slipped the bridle, turned it loose to graze and water. It loped down to the creek, drank, then began to roll as Black Bull carried the saddle into the lodge, trailed by Whitton.

"Sun Woman, listen—" Black Bull began, then halted.

There was no one in the lodge and the fire was out.

Black Bull frowned, putting down saddle and blanket. "Oh, she's gone off somewhere to talk. When she gets to talking, she never knows what time it is. We've had more arguments—"

Still, he was frowning slightly as they went outside. He looked around, but though there were several women sitting in the shade, gossiping, Sun Woman was not among them. "Maybe at the creek," Black Bull said. "Cooling off. Dark Rider, I'll have to apologize."

"No need," Whitton said, but there was something in him like the first pangs of sickness. They walked toward the stream where the pony had just gone all the way over, grunted with satisfaction, and come to its feet.

"It's strange," Black Bull said, for there was no sign of his wife there.

"Maybe—" Whitton began, but his name being called chopped off the words. He turned to see Smoke Rising coming toward him. She looked at the grazing horse, then at Black Bull and Elias, and there was worry on her face.

"Black Bull, is Sun Woman home?"

"I . . . her horse is there."

"I know, that's why I asked. I saw it come up to your lodge with no rider and—"

"No rider?" Black Bull's hand shot out, clamped her shoulder. "What do you mean, no rider?"

"I told you to talk to her—" Whitton began.

"I did talk to her, just like you said. She laughed at me. I spoke to her again this morning when I saw her riding out, and she laughed again. And then I saw Fancy Runner come in without her and I thought . . . It frightened me. I went looking for her and I couldn't find her anywhere."

She licked her lips. "I think she's been thrown."

Black Bull Man's tall figure came erect, and he was like something cast from bronze as he looked at the horse. "She could ride as well as me, and Fancy Runner never shies." Without another word, he whirled, ran to his own horse tethered by his lodge, unlooped the rein, leaped aboard. Sensing its rider's urgency, the stallion tried to run, but Black Bull jerked it up so hard it reared. Then, holding it to a walk, he worked his way through the cottonwoods, following the tracks of the painted pony.

"Dark Rider," Smoke Rising breathed as they watched him vanish among the trees. "Do you think—"

"I don't want to think!" Whitton snapped, and then he was running toward the ranch house and the corrals. There, he picked up a rope, a Henry rifle, and in three minutes its loop had settled over his buckskin's head. He put on a bridle, wasted no time with a saddle, mounted bareback. *It got to be Apaches,* he thought, as he sent the horse at a run through the cottonwoods. *Lord, God, please let it be Apaches. . . .*

Chapter Twelve

AT THE CANYON mouth, Elias Whitton caught up with Black Bull Man, who still walked his horse, staring at the ground. "You picked it up?" Whitton asked; but before Black Bull answered, he saw it, too: the fresh, small tracks of the pony, among all the others laid down there. He recognized them by the slight overreach in the paint's left hind leg he'd noticed as it went down to water; the spring of grass back to its original position had hardly

begun, certifying their freshness. Whitton said, "You swing right outside the canyon, I'll swing left. We'll save time that way."

Black Bull did not even answer, only put the stallion into a run. The buckskin ran, too, and when they were outside the canyon, each man cut several figure eights. Then Black Bull let out a short, harsh bark. Whitton raced to join him.

"This way," Black Bull said.

"You hold the trail, I'll ride ahead," Elias said, taking a bearing on the direction of the tracks. He rode out two hundred yards, looping, cut the trail again. Black Bull came up at a run, and this time Whitton held the trail while the Comanche rode ahead and cut the sign.

Thus they progressed by leaps and bounds, a half mile, three quarters, a mile, and not a word passed between them. Like a brace of well-trained hounds, each knew his business, no need for communication was necessary. But more than that, each feared to say what he was thinking.

But once Black Bull raised his head and looked at Whitton, and what Elias read in his eyes chilled him to the marrow.

Two miles, three, and now the trail led downhill, below the level of the surrounding prairie into a deep swale. Here, another small spring welled out, creating a stretch of boggy ground and lush green grass. In the mud, the hoofprints were clear. They rode more swiftly.

Beyond the spring, the trail almost vanished on hard-packed dirt. Both men swung in circles, and then Black Bull barked again, almost exactly like a dog, and Whitton galloped up. "Hold it," Black Bull said. "I think it leads around that butte."

It was not so much a butte as a hump of ground, formless, grassy and furred with ocotillo and prickly pear, and Whitton held the tracks while Black Bull raced ahead and disappeared behind it.

Elias rode on, slowly, watching the faint hoofprints. He was only a hundred yards from the butte when, from behind it, there came a sound like nothing he had ever heard before. Half scream, half bellow, a man in unbear-

able agony, and Whitton cursed and lashed the buckskin.

Rounding the butte, he reined in hard. Black Bull was on the ground, lying across something there. As Elias watched, he raised his head, let out that eerie shriek again. Then he shoved himself erect, was on his feet, staggering, looking at Whitton with staring eyes and contorted face.

Again that strange howl issued from his throat, as he pointed. Whitton left the buckskin's back and hit the ground running. Then he brought up short, sucking in his breath as he saw what lay there on the ground.

Flies and buffalo gnats already crawled over Sun Woman's face; her wide-open eyes and open mouth were black with them and they went in and out her nostrils. She lay on her back, head tilted at a crazy angle, naked, coppery body shining in the sun, the doeskin dress shoved high above her breasts. Her legs were spread wide, and on her breasts there was dried blood where human fingernails had raked them.

Five seconds, ten, Whitton stared at her. Then he heard a whispering sound, whirled, and he saw Black Bull's Colt being dragged from holster. "God damn you!" Black Bull shrieked and raised the gun and fired. Whitton fell sideways, and heard the smack of the bullet by his head and then his own gun was out.

But there was no need to use it. As if his legs had given way, Black Bull sat down all at once, and his Colt spilled from his hand. He put his face in his hands and began to wail. Whitton did not hesitate, but snatched up the gun.

Black Bull went on wailing. Whitton went to Sun Woman, pulled down her dress, put her legs together, shooed the gnats and flies from her face, closed her eyes. Now the wailing ended in gulping sobs. Whitton turned to Black Bull, as the Comanche raised his head, and looked into a gaze of hatred and grief that was like a flame. After a moment, slowly, body trembling, Black Bull got to his feet.

"All right," he husked. "You got all the guns. So if you're smart, you'll kill me now."

"Kill you—"

"You'd better," Black Bull said. His voice was low, steady, toneless. "Because if you don't, I'm gonna roast you and every Rancho Bravo man there is over a slow fire or see him skinned alive and slow."

Whitton said, "Bull, it wasn't—"

"You look." The Comanche's hand moved almost listlessly. "Just look. One horse—shod."

Whitton's eyes flickered, and then he saw it, and he knew why Black Bull had tried to kill him. The calk mark was plain in the dust a few yards away.

"There ain't no shod horses out here but Rancho Bravo horses," Black Bull went on, in that same dead voice. "So you better kill me now, Whitton, you see? You don't, when I get through there'll be no sign that anything called Rancho Bravo ever was."

Elias stared at him a moment. His left hand made a quick motion, something glittered in the air. Instinctively Black Bull caught it. "There's your gun," Elias said.

Black Bull's mouth twisted. "Fool. Always got to give the even break."

"If it comes to that. No reason why it should." He gestured. "You said it. One horse. One man, one Rancho Bravo man. All right, he's yours, quick as we can lay our hands on him."

"No," Black Bull said. "You're *all* mine, every one, unless you kill me now." He raised the gun. "I thought . . ." he said. "I thought maybe . . . Well, I was wrong. They're all the same, all of 'em. And they don't deserve to live, not on good Comanche land. And there's time. Three days before the wagons come. You'll all be in the buzzards' craws by then. We're double you and twice the guns—"

"I said I'd give him to you!" Elias roared, feeling sweat soaking his body in the hot sun. "That one! You can have him, to do with what you want! All I got to do is read his sign. I shod mosta them horses myself! I'll find him and you can have him and take it outa him your way!"

Black Bull stared at him, then shook his head, mouth twisting. "You lie and you know it." His voice cut like a whip's lash. "Even after what he did to her, you think

your *Tejanos* would give him up? To what I'll do to him? Think they'd turn one of their own over to the People for screwin' and killin' a dirty Injun squaw? White's white, red's red, I've seen it too much, Whitton. And . . ." his voice broke ". . . there's the proof right there. If she was white, they might hand him over. But she's red, and they'll fight until they're dead to save him. So there's one answer only. We'll kill you all."

"Then you'll have to start with me," Elias said.

"I aim to." Black Bull's thumb curled around the hammer. He was, Elias knew, insane with rage and grief and would as soon be killed as live.

And in another second one of them would die and take Rancho Bravo with him, no matter which way it went and — "Black Bull! Hold your fire! You still got a debt to pay me!" Elias's voice rang out desperately.

Black Bull only stared at him. "I saved her once," Elias said, words rushing out. "You remember?"

"I remember. And we're quits." His eyes glittered. "You were paid."

"Four horses, a buckskin suit, some talk—" Whitton spat. "Hell, if that was all she's worth, I'll give you four horses and a buckskin suit."

"Damn your soul!" Black Bull rasped.

"Pay you back and then we're quits again. Or was she worth more?" This time he was the one who lashed the words.

There was a heartbeat then when Whitton knew that one or both of them were on the edge of death. Then Black Bull lowered the gun. "Damn you," he said again, voice shaking.

"I want that much," Elias said. "Time enough to find him and hand him over to you. Me, myself. I'll give him to you and then he's yours. I'll pick up his trail right now and I'll have him back to you before the sun comes up tomorrow."

Black Bull's face was like something hewn from flint. "You know what I'll do with him," he whispered.

"I know," Elias said. "That's up to you. He's earned it."

Black Bull did not answer. Whitton felt his heart pound-

ing in his chest, sweat streaming down his body.

"All right," the Comanche said at last, voice cold as mountain water running over stone. "You got until tomorrow mornin' to bring him to me—alive. And if he ain't here by sunrise, it goes, all of it." He swept his hand out flat. "And then we go after the Colorado wagons—*and Rancho Bravo's women!*"

"Till sunrise," Elias said. "You'll hold off till then."

"No shot fired if your men don't shoot. But no longer than that." Black Bull holstered the gun with a quick motion. He strode past Elias, looked down at Sun Woman, and Whitton heard the thick, sobbing noise he made. Then Black Bull bent, picked her up, cradling her body in his arms. He lifted his head, began to sing in an eerie mournful key.

Whitton mounted the buckskin, raced it to the ranch, but walked it in so as not to cause excitement. With concealed urgency, he found Pitt, told him quickly what had happened; together they rounded up those men not out on the range. Hill, a man named Johnson, and Barney Dunn were the missing riders.

"And you got to understand," Elias rasped, when all of them were in the main room of the fort, "that if you want to be alive when the sun comes up tomorrow, nobody fires a shot. Catch Hill and Johnson soon as they come in, git 'em in here with you. Then keep this place closed up, tight, and nobody goes out until I come back with Dunn."

"Dunn?" Pitt echoed. "You mean—?"

"Hell, yes! I knew that even before I seen his horse's tracks. He's ridin' that bald-faced ches'nut, ain't he?"

"Yeah," somebody said. "He went out on that."

"I put a new shoe on its right hind foot three days ago. One new one, three old ones— He might as well have wrote his name!"

"And you're goin' after him?"

"Damn well told!" Elias snapped.

Pitt's eyes were hard, his mouth thin. "All right. When you bring him in, we'll try him and swing the horny bastard."

"No," Elias said. "Black Bull Man gits him."

There was silence. Then Roland said, "Whitton, you don't mean that. You know what them damned Injuns'll do to him when they git their hands on him? You ever seen a white man the Comanches worked on?"

"Hell, yes, he has," somebody said. "He's bound to! Likely worked on some hisself!"

Pitt stepped forward. "Whitton, you got to listen. Now, I know you are an owner and all that, but this won't wash. I don't give a damn what Dunn did. Okay he raped a squaw and killed her. All the same, by God, he's a *white* man! Maybe that don't mean nothin' to you, but it does to us! We'll fight before we let those red bastards torture him to death by inches!"

"Fight? You ain't got a prayer to fight!"

"Maybe not, since *you* give them red devils all our guns and ammo!" Pitt said fiercely. "But we can sure-hell try! Maybe the best thing's to lock in right now and let 'em turn loose their damned wolf—"

It went then, the last scrap of rein on his temper. "You'll do no such thing!" Whitton roared. "You'll take my orders and do what I say and keep your goddamn mouths shut!" He faced them spraddle-legged, eyes blazing, command in every tense line of his squat body, no longer Elias, no longer the nigger cowboy walking softly around the whites. "I'm an owner of Rancho Bravo and by God you'll take my orders! More, I'm the only man can save your hair, and you better git that through your head! I didn't come this far, work this hard, take these risks, carry this whole outfit on my back with the Comanches to see it go down the chute now for a thing like Barney Dunn!" He saw the surprise, the awe, on their faces. "This is the only chance you got," he rasped, "and I'm givin' it to you. And if you're so damned concerned about Dunn, maybe you better try thinkin' about Gannon, Calhoon, Killraine, and especially about their women!" He threw out his arm in a ferocious gesture. "They out there now, with that wagon train, and a lot of your other friends as well, with no rock walls to hide behind! Now, you better choose which you want the Comanch' to have—

Barney Dunn or Evelyn Calhoon and Irene Gannon and the rest, as well as you! Which is it you think you want?"

Nobody answered.

"Well," Elias roared, "speak up! Which is it?"

Pitt's face was pale beneath the tan. After a moment, he said thinly, "All right, you're the boss."

"Then remember that," Whitton snapped. "I'm dependin' on you to hold 'em until I git back." He touched his gun. "Afterwards, any one of you don't like how I handle things can come at me and welcome!"

Only silence, those white faces staring at him. Then feet shuffled, somebody cleared his throat. The knot of men broke apart.

Whitton fished a key from his pocket, opened the trapdoor, went down into the cellar. After he had found what he was searching for and slipped it into his pocket, he ran back up the ladder, tossed the key to Pitt. "I'll be back before the sun comes up. Remember, no shootin' unless they start it. If they do, then the fat's in the fire and give 'em everything you got."

He picked up his rifle, blanket, saddle and strode out. In the yard, he halted. Down the canyon in the cottonwoods, something was happening: the lodges were coming down. Whitton's jaw tightened. Well, it was to be expected. Black Bull was already withdrawing the women and children; but from now on Rancho Bravo would be ringed with warriors. He saddled the buckskin, mounted, and sent it loping out of the canyon. By the time he reached the open, there was no sign of Indians, save the roiling dust far away of many horses and travois as they moved camp northeast.

Chapter Twelve

DUNN HAD RIDDEN south, in panic, at a run. He had a three-hour start, but Elias Whitton kept his buckskin at a steady trot, leaning from the saddle to read the sign. It could not have been much clearer if Dunn had left a paper trail. There was no need to hurry. The day was hot, the sun, high in a sky of perfect blue, a white, dazzling ball. Whitton knew Dunn's horse, as he knew every mount in the remuda. The bald-faced chestnut was totally cold-blooded, strong, but without bottom, endurance. At this pace, in this heat, it could not last for long. There was a story he'd heard in the slave quarters years ago, about a terrapin and a jackrabbit. Slow but sure; that would do it.

After the first mile, he paused every now and then to scan the land ahead: rolling plains, broken here and there by washes and buttes and upthrusts, grama dotted with yucca and, increasingly, giving way to creosote. In the distance, the Santiago range was a faint, blue smudge on the horizon. It was not likely that Dunn had begun to watch his backtrail or doubled back, but Whitton took no chances. Whatever the man's failings, he could shoot, and a Henry rifle could drop a man at a thousand yards. But, out there in the sunglare, nothing moved save cattle, an occasional antelope, once a coyote.

Six miles or seven; again Elias swung down. This time he knelt, stirred a pile of horse droppings with a stick, tested a few dried splotches of lather on the surrounding grass with his thumb and forefinger. Sure enough, Dunn's horse had played out here; the fleeing man had been

forced to rest it. Whitton judged the stop had cost Dunn a half hour of his lead. He mounted, rode on, still at that even trot.

Dunn was no longer forcing the horse as hard. It had dawned on him that he might break its wind and kill it, and if he did, he was finished. Presently, Whitton's quarry changed his tactics. Now he was riding even more slowly and trying to hide his trail. Elias grinned without any mirth. Dunn's attempt was pathetic; he could no more conceal his sign from someone Comanche-trained than he could change the color of his eyes. Horse sweat fell, left marks and splotches. Metal shoes scratched rock. In this dry country, a turned pebble stood out like a sore thumb, its underside a totally different texture and color from its topside, wind-blasted and desert-varnished by the centuries. All his futile efforts accomplished was to cut down his lead.

But with all his zigging and zagging, there was no doubt of it: he was still bound south, toward the Santiagos. Likely, to him, that made sense. Down there, inside the deep Big Bend of the Rio Bravo, the country turned to real badlands: desert, dry creeks, the great hump of the Chisos mountains. Dunn figured that surely somewhere in that jumbled wasteland he could hide, then cross the Rio into Mexico.

But the Santiagos were still a long way off, and Whitton had no intention of allowing Dunn to reach or pass through them and enter the deep Big Bend.

The sign was fresher now, Dunn's horse weary. It had not drunk since morning. Elias rode off the trail a half mile, found a spring Dunn could not have known of, watered his own mount and drank, and picked up the trail again. Maybe two hours more, he judged, maybe less. Thinking of what Black Bull would do to Dunn, his spine chilled.

That was a dark, ugly underside of tribal life he had never been able to come to terms with: the torture of captives. But to the Comanches it made sense, and it was a part of life, of war, of manhood.

They were the People, the only human beings. Outsid-

ers, especially enemies, were subhuman, inferior; they could only be made human by adoption. Women and children old enough to travel could be adopted and usually were not harmed; except, a war party, long out and away from women, might take its collective pleasure with female captives. Babes in arms, of course, could not travel with a war party; they were killed immediately. And as for men— Every Indian had to endure self-torture in passing from boyhood to full male status. And the knowledge that, if captured, he would die slowly in exquisite pain was incentive to die fighting rather than surrender; any man fool enough to be taken alive deserved what he got. Thus, captives were usually taken back to camp and turned over to the women. It made the squaws feel as if they, too, participated in war against the tribal enemies; it gave them pleasure. When they had been allowed to destroy a man bit by bit, they would be quiet and calm and loving for a long while afterward.

But the women would not get a chance at Barney Dunn. When Black Bull got through, there would be nothing left for them to play with. . . .

"Son of a gun," Elias said, in puzzlement. A half hour had passed, he had covered a lot of ground. Dunn's trail was even fresher, but something about it baffled Whitton. Slowly its character had altered, the horse slowing from a walk to a tired amble, pausing from time to time to crop a mouthful of grass, moving from one choice clump to another, wholly unurgent, picking its own way. Now it was as if it had no rider at all, but the depth of track proved that Dunn was still aboard. Elias paused, once more scanning the ground ahead. Maybe the heat had got to Dunn; there was no other explanation for a hunted man riding like that. Even if he had thought he'd shaken pursuit, he would not have let his mount wander in such a way if he had his senses. Unless, of course, Dunn was cleverer than Whitton thought, had devised some novel kind of trap.

More alert than ever, now, rifle at the ready, he rode on, head twisting constantly in the Indian way of looking,

eyes probing every break of the roughening ground ahead. . . .

Then Whitton swore, was off the horse, squatting in the grama, staring at what he had scooped up from beside the trial.

The cork was a big one, the kind that stoppered a half-gallon jug. Whitton sniffed at it, grimaced. He slipped it in his pocket, rode on more swiftly. Ahead, a long dry wash sliced the land.

Only minutes old, the tracks of the meandering horse led toward it. Presently Elias dismounted, and, rifle up, loped forward in a crouch. He crawled the last few yards, shoving the gun ahead of him, looked over the wash's edge. Fifty yards away, the chestnut, reins dangling, saddle empty, pawed at the gravel bottom, seeking moisture. Beyond, in the shadow of the bank, sprawled Barney Dunn, the empty jug cradled in his arm. Even from that distance, his rasping snore was loud in the drowsy silence of the fading afternoon.

There was nothing to it. Dunn didn't even stir as Whitton came to him, silently as a wisp of fog, and slipped his Colt from holster, thrusting it in his own waistband. Flies crawled over Dunn's red, dusty face. The sound he made was like a boar hog's grunting; his smell was like a boar hog's, too. Elias held his breath as he took pigging strings from his belt, bound Dunn's wrists together. Once Dunn's eyes opened. "Go 'way," he mumbled, closed them again.

Whitton took the chestnut's reins, whistled softly. His own well-trained little buckskin came down the wash, head high and turned to avoid stepping on the reins. Elias took the canteen from his saddle, uncorked it, held it to Dunn's mouth.

Barney Dunn swallowed, gagged, then drank. Elias stepped back, waited. In a moment, the liquid sent the alcohol coursing again through his dehydrated body. Opening his eyes, he painfully sat up, not even noticing his hands were tied; blinked groggily at the muzzle of the Colt Whitton held centered on his head. "Wha—?"

"On your feet," Elias said.

"Cain't." Dunn grimaced. "Sick. Gawd, I'm sick."

"No," said Whitton almost sadly. "I'm afraid you as well as you ever gonna be. Now, Dunn, git up and mount. We got to ride."

Not long after dark, he found the Comanche camp about seven miles north of Rancho Bravo, at a place the People called Sometimes Spring, because the flow of water was uncertain.

Smoke Rising had pitched the lodge for Black Bull, who was now without a woman, and had built the fire that lit it. Outside, drums were beating; Sun Woman's relatives sang and wailed in mourning. There was great stir and excitement in the camp, an air compounded of rage, grief, and expectancy.

Black Bull's eyes were sunken in his head, his face was almost like a skull's in the flickering, orange light, as he looked at Whitton and Barney Dunn across the fire inside the lodge. "I'm not interested in anything he's got to say." The Comanche's words were harsh, metallic, in English. He gestured. "They're waitin' out there for him. And it's gonna take all night for him to die and maybe through tomorrow. I'll see to that."

"Listen . . ." Tears ran down Dunn's cheeks. "Listen, fer Gawd's sake, you cain't do that to me. Not what Elias told me—"

Black Bull turned to Whitton. "You told him what?"

"Only what he could expect," Elias said.

"You . . . you gonna torture me. Skin me alive, he said . . ." Dunn almost sobbed the words. "Cut my ribs from my backbone, pull 'em out. . . . Cut off my . . ." He dropped his head, began to cry.

Black Bull laughed. "You're more Comanche than I thought, Elias. So he's suffered all the way in. Good. I thank you."

"He deserves everything he gits," Elias said. "I never said he didn't. But first, before you take him out yonder, you got to hear his story. That's important. Because he wasn't the only one."

"He was alone," Black Bull said. "I read the sign."

"I kno.. about the sign. But hear him out."

Black Bull hesitated. "All right," he rasped at last. "Say what you've got to say."

Dunn raised his head, his blasted face grotesque, lined with channels tears had cut through dust. "It . . . it warn't my fault. I was drunk."

Black Bull turned to Whitton. "So, somebody there at Rancho Bravo gave him firewater!"

"Listen," Elias said. "Go on, Dunn."

Barney Dunn licked swollen lips. "It was Devlin," he whispered. "Him and Plumb. I met 'em this mornin', early, out on the range. They jest rode out of the brush, the two of 'em, and they give me howdy and . . . they had a jug." He managed, briefly, to make his eyes meet Black Bull's stone-faced gaze. "I mean, I wouldn'ta done it, only . . . they got me liquored up. We set around, had some drinks and talked. Mostly about women. Devlin . . . He said he'd had a lot of Injun gals and a man hadn't lived until he'd had a squaw—"

Black Bull stepped across the fire, hands raised, reaching for Dunn's throat. Elias moved between them. "Dammit, I said listen!"

After a moment, Black Bull dropped his arms. "Go on."

"But we talked about some other things," Dunn managed thickly. "They said they'd been sizin' me up for a long time, that I was jest the kind of partner they needed. That any time I wanted to quit Rancho Bravo, I could throw in with them and git rich quick."

His voice cracked. "Then they rode off, but they left me the jug. And me and it, we headed back to Rancho Bravo to draw my time, you understand? Only, I met her first. Hell, I didn't know I was gonna run into her out there all alone, nobody around. And I was drunk and all that talk made me as horny as a wildcat and . . . I couldn't he'p myself, honest. It was almost like somebody else was doin' it. I jest talked nice to her and asked her didn't she want to try a white man, and then I reached for her, and she hit me with her quirt and—I dragged her off her horse and throwed her down and— She fought like a damn cougar. And I grabbed her hair and twisted her head

and— Somethin' snapped, I broke her neck. Then I seen she was dead, and I knowed I better not come back to Rancho Bravo, so I lit out for Big Bend right away to find Plumb and Devlin—"

"Big Bend?"

"The deep Big Bend, down there by the Rio. They said they'd cached their wagons, decided to wait down there—"

"For what?" Black Bull asked.

"I'll git it over with quick," Elias cut in. "It comes down to this. Plumb and Devlin didn't give up. They still want Rancho Bravo and tradin' rights with the Comanches. They knew Dunn and that all they had to do was give him a jug and lay some horny talk on him and he'd do somethin' to trigger a war between the People and Rancho Bravo. Then you'd wipe us out, they'd move in. Big Bend would be a good place for them to hide until the dust settled; they know it as good as you and me. So they'd lay low, there, and then, when Rancho Bravo was done for, come back, playin' innocent, bring their wagons—"

"That's it!" Dunn said frantically. "That's it exactly! They told me I'd have a third in Rancho Bravo, be a boss—"

"Told you a lot," Black Bull growled. "So you could spill it all to me?"

"They never had no idea he'd be took alive," Whitton said. "Or if he was that anybody'd listen. They figgered he'd be rubbed out with the rest of us. They didn't know it would be Sun Woman he'd git hold of, or how it'd happen; they jest knew it was bound to happen, that's all." He paused. "So *they* killed her, too. Jest as much as if they'd held her while he broke her neck."

Black Bull said quietly, after a moment, "Dunn. Where in Big Bend are they?"

"I don't know," Dunn quavered. "They jist said to ride on in through the War Trail Gap. Keep ridin' along the War Trail, they'd see me, come to me. Please—" His voice rose. "It's them you want, not me. I wouldn'ta done it if they hadn't give me that booze and egged me on. I'll

he'p you go after 'em, I'll do anything you say, only— For Gawd's sake, you talk like a white man, you can understand— Don't let 'em hurt me! I cain't stand bein' hurt."

"Too bad," Black Bull said. "Because hurt is what you're gonna be. You're gonna be hurt all night long and all day tomorrow and just as long as I can keep you alive so you can feel it." He drew a knife from a beaded sheath. Then, suddenly, he cut the thongs binding the cowboy's hands. "Take off your clothes. When you go out there, you go out naked, so everybody can see your ugliness."

"Elias, please—" Dunn turned his head imploringly, and he flexed his hands, numb from lack of circulation. Elias stepped back, thumb hooked in belt above his Colt. Dunn made a blubbering sound, reading the answer in his eyes.

"Take 'em off," Black Bull said, "or I'll cut 'em off. Along with some meat here and there."

Dunn swallowed and then, with trembling hands, took off his filthy shirt. Outside, the drums went on beating.

Beneath a vee of suntan at the throat, Dunn's torso was maggot-pale. He tossed aside his belt and empty holster. "The pants, too?" he husked.

"Especially the pants," Black Bull said, in a voice that raised the hackles on Whitton's neck.

Dunn licked his lips, stripped off the dirty woolen garments. He held them in front of him protectively, almost shyly, fumbling with them. "Drop 'em!" Black Bull commanded.

Whitton tensed. Dunn's hand plunged in a pocket. Then he dropped the pants, stepped back, and now he held a tiny Deringer, single-barreled, the hammer cocked, its muzzle trained on Black Bull. "Now, damn you," Dunn breathed, "you let me go or—"

Whitton's gun was out, in a quick, smooth motion. He fired as Black Bull whirled aside and the simultaneous thunder of the Colt and the crack of the little gun mingled to shake the tepee. The ball from the Deringer plowed into the inner liner of the tepee; Whitton's bullet caught

Dunn beneath the arm, whirled him around. Elias fired once more, again. The slugs picked Dunn up, threw him back across a pile of robes. His body riddled, he was dead before he landed on them.

The tepee was full of powder smoke. When it cleared, Black Bull was staring at Elias with face contorted. "Damn you," he whispered. "You've cheated me—"

"I saved your life," Whitton rasped.

"You said he was clean." Black Bull trembled with fury. "But you left that hide-out on him!"

"All right, I missed it," Elias said. "My fault. But how was I to know, anyhow, you'd untie his hands?" As Black Bull stepped forward and people crowded to the door, Whitton said, "All right. You want me instead? Then we'll go outside and git it over with. You come at me, I aim to kill you. Because I got business in Big Bend, and you nor nobody's gonna stop me."

Black Bull halted. "You got— Plumb and Devlin?"

"Plumb and Devlin," Whitton answered. He gestured at Dunn's body. "*He* ain't nothin', jest a poor goddamn fool that was his own worst enemy. He ain't the one you want, anyhow. It's Devlin that really killed Sun Woman."

Black Bull's eyes swirled.

"And Plumb killed my wife," Elisa went on, in a voice like iron on iron. "And he's down there somewhere in Big Bend and I aim to find him, find them both and put an end to them. This ain't a matter of Rancho Bravo, neither, nor the People. This is a matter personal with me." He drew in breath. "Now, if you want to fight me for what you think I give to Dunn, you come ahead. God damn your soul, I will kill you. Because I ain't goin' to let you keep me from collectin' what Plumb and Devlin owe. So come on, cut loose your wolf and git it over with so I can git on about my business."

Black Bull Man stood motionless across the fire, knees slightly bent, body poised, the Bowie in his hand, and his eyes were dark tunnels with red flares at their ends. Then, suddenly, he came erect.

"Big Bend," he whispered. "But we don't know where."

"We," Elias said.

"We. You think I'm gonna let you have them to yourself? I'll have twenty men ready to ride in an hour. And it don't matter where they are in there, we'll find 'em."

"We ain't goin' in there with no twenty men," Elias said; but he felt a wild exultancy rising in him. Suddenly he holstered his gun. "You know as well as me that Plumb and Devlin know that country good as any Comanche. They'll spot a big war party, drift out ahead of it. We'd never catch 'em. No. There ain't but one way to do it. And that's for the two of us to go in there against 'em. Find their trail and run 'em down and hit 'em before they ever know we're there. Hunt 'em down like a pair of mad wolves, give 'em no chance at all to git away. It ain't gonna be no war party. If anybody goes with me, it'll be nobody but you. It's us they owe the debt to. It's us that'll collect it, ourselves, in our own way, and quicker."

Outside, the drums were silent. Black Bull turned toward the doorway of the lodge, as people crowded in, then fell back at the expression on his face. He gestured at the corpse of Dunn. "Drag this out and give it to the women. When they're through with it, feed it to the dogs for all I care."

He stepped clear, faced Elias as men came in, seized Dunn's body, pulled it out. Immediately, from the darkness came a chorus of highpitched, angry, cheated, lustful squalling. Black Bull said, "All right. The two of us, then. I'll give you time to ride to Rancho Bravo. Tell your people to stay out of the way of ours until we're back, and I'll tell mine the same. I'll meet you at Double Hills three hours after sunup. And . . ." his voice thickened. "And when we take 'em, Devlin's mine. You understand? He's mine and you're not to interfere!" Before Elias answered, he turned, went out.

Whitton stood there for a moment. Then he saw the Deringer, lying almost hidden in the robes' shag. Picking it up, he slipped it in his pocket. It had served its purpose.

Rancho Bravo owned only one, which had got into the supplies bought in San Antonio by mistake. It was what he had searched for and found in the cellar before riding after Dunn.

Bringing Dunn in had been one of the most harrowing journeys of his life. At the spring where he'd watered earlier, he forced Dunn under, soused and sobered him, and then heard his story. He was not surprised; after he had found the cork, he had expected it. And then, head clearing, the full impact of his fate struck Dunn with cruel force. "Whitton . . . you ain't gonna let 'em hurt me? You know how they treat prisoners. . . . You wouldn't let 'em do that to a *white* man."

"Me," Elias said, "I'm a nigger. Remember? Let's ride on."

And as they did, he spared Dunn nothing, telling him carefully and precisely how he would likely die and how long it would take. It was not something he enjoyed, but it was necessary that Dunn understand exactly. If Whitton were to bring off what he had planned, there must be no doubt whatsoever in Dunn's mind of what lay ahead. And finally Dunn was begging him: "Elias. In the name of God. You got to shoot me. Now. Clean and painless. You— You'd do that much for a horse."

"No," Elias said. "What I got to do is deliver you alive to Black Bull. Ever' man on Rancho Bravo will die if I don't."

By the time they neared the camp and his mount's ears pricked, meaning Comanche scouts were closing in, Dunn was a broken, quivering wreck, and that was when Whitton did it: he slipped the loaded, primed Deringer in the pocket of Dunn's pants.

"I can do that much for you," he said. "No more. It's got one round in it, and if you git your hands loose and git the chance, I'd advise you to use it on yourself. It sure as hell won't do you no good against nobody else, but maybe it will save you hurtin'. But if you mention it, or where it come from, I'll help Black Bull work on you myself to prove you lied: and I might know some tricks he don't."

"Oh, Gawd, Elias, thanks."

"Por nada," Elias said, and then the Comanches had come up. . . .

Outside in the darkness, now, the women were like wild beasts fighting over meat.

Well, Elias thought, Dunn had got his chance—and had used it about as Elias had guessed he would. Too cowardly to shoot himself, he'd tried to bluff with it—

And it had worked out better that way. He was dead, quickly, cleanly, spared the torture that would have martyred him in the eyes of Rancho Bravo men and forced them to take revenge. More, the bullet that had killed him had perhaps saved Black Bull and put him in Elias's debt by just that much. Anyhow, Elias thought, it was finished, that part of it. Now there were Plumb and Devlin to deal with, and that was a wholly different matter. . . .

He left the tepee, careful not to look at what the women were doing near a fire in the center of the camp circle; and, mounting, rode to Rancho Bravo.

Chapter Thirteen

WHITTON FINGERED THE cold campfire ashes, then stood up, dusting hands on his chaps. "They're down here, all right," he said.

He stood there on the bench of land shelving along the south side of the Santiago mountains and looked out across the shimmering wasteland men called the deep Big Bend. It was the Devil's own country; and it was magnificent.

A huge triangle formed by the sharp southeastward swing of the Rio Grande and its hairpin turn back north, sealed off at the top by the long, bleak range of the Santiagos, it was the most brutal and beautiful terrain in

Texas: desert, sunblasted hills, dry creeks, raw and barren mountains, cliffs, escarpments, a thousand lost and hidden canyons. Whitton knew it well, and so did Black Bull Man; for they had traveled the War Trail to Mexico through it many times.

Out there, save for a little dustdevil whirling across a vast, open flat, nothing moved or stirred. The Rosillo Mountains, the Dead Horse Mountains, dozens of other humps and peaks and ranges, and nearer the river itself, the great massif of the Chisos, timber-clad, and with grass and water. Beyond that, the Rio, coiling through deep and awesome canyons or sandy, reed-clad banks; and beyond the Rio, Mexico, hundreds of miles more of nearly empty desert and badlands. And somewhere in there were Plumb and Devlin, and it was, he thought, going to be like finding two ants hidden in an acre of cinders. But they were going to do it, somehow. He turned toward the horses. "Well, let's cut sign."

Black Bull nodded without speaking. He had spoken rarely since they had met at the Double Hills, a landmark south of Rancho Bravo, the previous morning. It was as if all the energy, all the strength, in him was concentrated into his hatred for Devlin and Plumb, and he had no time nor words for ordinary speech. Dressed in heavy buckskins against the cactus—for everything, almost, that lived down here was armored with thorns or claws or fangs—he had the look of a man alive in Hell, eyes sunken deep in his head, lips thin and set. *I got to watch him,* Elias thought, as they mounted. *As long as he gits Devlin, he don't care whether he lives or dies himself, or who he's got to take with him. . . .*

They spread out, working the bench carefully, like a pair of hunting dogs searching for a trail. With rounds chambered, their rifles were carried across the saddle, and, from time to time, they halted, raised their heads, and looked carefully around. Plumb and Devlin might have doubled back, laid an ambush. And Apaches, too, came through here in certain seasons. Nothing about this country could be trusted, taken for granted.

Plumb and Devlin had a whole day's start, and Elias

had not wasted time at Rancho Bravo after he had left the Comanche camp. There, he told Pitt and the others what had happened, omitting only how Dunn had got the Deringer. But Pitt grinned coolly. "There warn't but one gun like that in the whole outfit, and it locked up and you had the key. That was smart, damned smart. He's got what he had comin', but he wasn't cut up piece by piece like a side of beef. Nobody's gonna quarrel here with what happened." He went on, not with humility, but with acceptance, in a tone Elias had never heard him use before. "All right, Whitton. You tell us what's next. You're the only owner here."

Whitton met his eyes and something quickened in him. A barrier had been breached, if not entirely broken down. It was a beginning, anyhow.

"Nothing to tell, except stay in here and don't start any trouble. The Comanches are gonna hug their own camp. Explain that to the other owners when they come. And say I'll be back after we've nailed Plumb and Devlin and not before."

"You know," Pitt said, "We'd be happy to ride with you."

Whitton's voice was soft. "I appreciate it. But this is somethin' two men can do better than a crowd: me and Black Bull."

"Then good huntin'," Pitt said. "Bring the bastards down."

Riding his buckskin, leading an extra horse, Elias had met Black Bull at the Double Hills. They did not slow down to look for sign: either their quarry was heading for Big Bend or not. If not, they were already long gone somewhere else; but if they had told Dunn the truth, they would pass through the War Trail Gap of the Santiagos. South of the Santiagos, in the deep Big Bend, was where the hunt would really begin.

He and Black Bull had pushed their horses to the limit, had slept no more than four hours in the past forty-eight. They had crossed the Santiago gap in darkness. Then their manner had changed from that of coursing grayhounds to stalking wolves. They would have narrowed Plumb's

and Devlin's lead by hours, surely. The pair might be anywhere, now, close at hand or miles away. The first place to look was the nearest water: the spring on the flank of the Santiagos. Of course, desert-wise men like Plumb and Devlin would not camp directly by the water, for in the desert everyone came to water; they would have a place above it and in view of it. They could be waiting there even now, ready to open up when Black Bull and Elias came in range.

But they had not been. The stalk had yielded only the ashes of a small campfire, these in turn concealed by rocks laid over them in random fashion, as if a slide had left them there. Any casual passerby or ordinary Texan would have missed it; Black Bull and Whitton had patiently examined everything and found it.

Now, as Whitton worked down the slope, he was reassured. He had thought Dunn had told the truth. The Big Bend was the perfect place for them to lie low, ride out the explosion they had hoped to trigger with Dunn and whiskey as bomb and fuse. Then, after an interval, they could surface, see which way the wind blew, and act accordingly, and if Rancho Bravo had been wiped out, as according to all odds it should have been, they could retrieve their wagons, present their contents to the Indians, take over the ranch. They were here, all right, but they were moving deeper into the wasteland, seeking a more secure hiding place. Maybe it would be along the river; maybe in the Chisos; or in any one of a dozen fastnesses where there was water. There was no way to tell except find their trail and hunt them down.

That would not be easy. They themselves were desert-wise and Indian-trained. They knew how to hide their tracks. He and Black Bull would have to summon all the skill, patience, trained observation at their command. . . .

And an hour had now passed, and not another sign had cropped up to show which way they had headed since leaving their camp, probably at sundown the previous evening. Whitton and Black Bull did not give up, though. In the sun, high, now, and broiling sweat out of men and horses, they went on circling. Then Elias heard Black

Bull's grunt of triumph from a dozen yards away. The Indian had dismounted, was kneeling over something.

Whitton joined him and felt a flare of triumph. The sloping earth was solid rock, and Plumb and Devlin had pulled their horses' shoes so as not to scratch it or sink calk marks in softer earth. But one of them had not noticed the tiny lizard, sluggish with the desert chill, his horse had stepped on. Squashed and flattened, it lay in plain view, and an experienced eye could tell by the way its body was chopped which way the hoof that killed it was pointed.

Whitton raised his head, stared toward the rugged mass of the Rosillos, dominated by Rosillo Peak, across the huge sand flat, which was shagged with creosote and cactus and cut by dry creek beds and washes. There was a spring on the west side of Rosillo Peak. They would not be camped there, they would have traveled on; but it might have been a stopping place.

Impatience, though, could cost them dearly. He and Black Bull did not hurry, but with an idea now where to concentrate their efforts, they moved on slowly.

It was Whitton who found the horse droppings.

On the edge of the flat, they were only hours old, in a mounded pile. A wild horse would have spread its droppings while it grazed or traveled; this had come from a mount under saddle. "They're headin' for the Rosillos, all right." There was a strange, breathless undertone in Black Bull's voice. "There's two springs in there on the west flank." He sprang up on his horse. "Come on, Whitton!"

"Wait!" But Black Bull was already riding hard across the flat, leading his extra mount. Elias cursed. Out there in the open, they'd be prime targets if Plumb and Devlin had doubled back, set up an ambush— But there was nothing for it: Black Bull had lost all sense of self-preservation. In his rage, he felt immortal. Whitton kicked the buckskin, sent it racing after.

The flat was five miles wide, devoid of cover for a man on horseback. Whitton felt naked, enormous, crossing it straight up like that, but he had to cover Black Bull. Try as it might, his buckskin could not close the gap

between it and Black Bull's tall warhorse. And now the bleak, rocky shoulders of the Rosillos, every color of the rainbow in the slant of light, reared high above the flat, and to round them, Black Bull was heading for a canyon that was the passage to the springs, and— "Jesus," Elias rasped. "He's gone plumb crazy!" Furiously, he lashed the buckskin.

A half mile ahead, dwarfed by the rocky walls above him, Black Bull swung into the canyon mouth. "Wait!" Elias yelled, but he was too late. Shockingly, the desert silence exploded into gun sound. White smoke bloomed from the right canyon wall. A giant hand seemed to pick Black Bull up, throw him off his horse, which, with the led mount, veered off across the flats. Black Bull had landed in the shag of creosote at the canyon mouth and disappeared. Then, from the brush, smoke bloomed. He was not dead! He was firing back.

But wildly. The canyon threw back echoes as Black Bull sprayed the wall with lead as fast as he could shoot. Then his gun was empty, but Plumb and Devlin were still pouring rounds into the place marked by his smoke. Elias cursed, but there was nothing for it now. He released his own led horse, lashed the buckskin, slid low on its neck. It seemed to fly across the flat, and now Plumb and Devlin had him in their sights, he was in range, and they opened fire on him. He heard the ugly slap of lead, and with pressure of his knees made the buckskin zigzag. He rammed his rifle in its scabbard, then, with bullets whipping all around him, turned the horse for the spot where the Comanche lay.

As he came up on it, a scream broke from his throat, a Comanche war whoop. It cut through the sound of gunfire, and he heard and answer, guided on it. Then he saw the Indian, on hands and knees, torso a welter of blood. Elias sucked in breath, and now it was up to his horse— Knowing what was expected of it, the little animal pivoted, raced in, and Whitton, legs clamped, leaned far out. Black Bull tried to rise, fell back.

Now, Whitton thought, and he was oblivious to the gunfire and the slap of lead, the whine of riccochet. There

was nothing but Black Bull, on hands and knees, head down, and Elias stretched, reached—

He caught Black Bull's arms on the run and the weight of the Comanche's body would have jerked him from the saddle if his legs had not been clamped like iron. It was a running drag, now, no chance of getting Black Bull up, and he could only hold the Indian clear of the ground as the buckskin flew into the canyon and bullets screamed their deadly chorus across the defile. Whitton's arms ached, their sockets strained; half dangling from the saddle himself, he searched the ground ahead.

Then he saw it, a clump of boulders that offered shelter. He managed to put leg pressure on enough to turn the buckskin toward it, and for a moment he thought they would even make it. Then one of them shot his horse. It screamed, hindquarters giving way, and Whitton, still holding Black Bull, pitched off.

He landed hard, but came up like a rubber ball on the rebound, still gripping the Indian's arms. Suddenly, in his grip, Black Bull came alive, began to use his legs. Whitton let go with his right hand and it came up with his Colt and he fired blindly at the cliff above as he and Black Bull lurched toward the boulders.

His slugs threw off their aim enough to give them the chance they needed. Bullets chugged into the dirt behind his heels as he threw Black Bull behind the rocks, then dived in himself. Lead snarled off of stone as Plumb and Devlin laced the hiding place with bullets. But the cover was good, Elias noted, panting; a rock half the size of a house shelved back over them, the canyon wall behind them jutted out, adding its protection. Now, until Plumb and Devlin shifted position, riccochets were the only danger.

Panting, Elias ran his hand down Black Bull's body. It was slick with blood. He felt a hole along the ribs; the wound was bad, maybe mortal. Whitton found the holstered Colt on Black Bull's hip, snaked it free. Up the canyon, hindquarters shattered, the buckskin scrabbled, screamed with pain. "God damn it, Hezekiah!" Whitton roared. "Shoot my horse and put it out of its mis'ry!"

The gunfire ceased all at once; there was no sound in the canyon but Black Bull's rasping breath and the horse's pain-filled sounds. Then Devlin's voice, almost jovial, echoed off the walls. "Use one of your own rounds, Elias! I ain't lendin' you none of mine!"

Whitton cursed. He edged forward, lined the Colt, fired. The horse's screaming ceased; he drew back into shelter just in time as a new fusillade whined off the rock.

Then the shooting stopped again. "One less bullet you fight back with! Good!" Devlin's voice turned ugly. "Goddamn you, how'd you know where we was?"

"You and Plumb are fools!" Elias yelled. "It didn't work! Dunn talked! You'll never show yo' faces again in Comanche country or Rancho Bravo range. Dunn killed a Comanche woman, and they'll kill you on sight, and slow— It's all fell through, Hezekiah! You'll never trade with the People or lay your hands on Rancho Bravo."

There was silence as they digested this. "We'll see!" But there was a tinny ring behind Devlin's bluster. "When you're gone, ever'thing'll be different! And you're done for, Whitton!"

Elias's hands worked swiftly, reloading every empty chamber in his and Black Bull's revolvers. "Come down and make me know it!"

The voice that answered now was deeper, fiercer. Plumb. "You'll know it soon enough, Elias! Because when I git you, I got a lot to pay you for. And it ain't jest your face I'll work on!" He paused. "You got no water, you got no hawses, you got no rifles. All you got's about ten feet of cover there behind them rocks. And Hez and I ain't in no hurry, none at all. We'll wait, Elias! We'll wait until we kin take you like a child from its mama's arms. And then what I'm gonna do to you for what you did to this face of mine will be somethin' even the Apaches will talk about! We got time, plenty of it! We got water, food and horses, and we got long guns! So make yo'se'f at home. You gonna be there quite a while!"

Whitton didn't even answer. The guns reloaded, now, he laid them aside, rolled Black Bull over. The Indian's eyes opened; his lips were parted, breath whistling in. "I

have taken a bad one," he whispered in Comanche.

Whitton probed. He looked into Black Bull's mouth, saw no blood. "It bad, but it ain't the lungs or heart. Your gut?"

"No."

Elias whooshed a relieved breath. "Yo' ribs, then. Some smashed, and you lost a lot of blood. Now, you lie still." He was stripping off his shirt.

"I was a fool—" Black Bull began.

"Lie still," Elias snapped. "Hush." And Black Bull did not speak as he bandaged the wound as best he could. As he did so, he told Black Bull the situation they were in, but he was not sure the Indian comprehended. All Black Bull said was, "Do we have water? I'm so thirsty—"

"We got no water."

"All right." Black Bull was silent, eyes closed, breathing heavy.

Whitton took out his pipe, lit it, savored the smoke, though he knew it would increase his thirst later. Peering up and down the canyon, he saw that there was no escape. The rock shelter in which they lay was the only cover for dozens of yards. Plumb and Devlin obviously had a perfect field of fire. They were out of effective pistol range, and the trap was perfect; he was helpless.

Yet, he could not find it in himself to blame Black Bull for having brought them to his pass. He, too, had known the insanity of grief and loss. He still felt it, after all these years, and it protected him from despair. Plumb was up there. No matter what happened, he would kill Plumb before he died. Logically, he knew he had no chance in Hell of that; but it was still something he felt in his bones.

Time wore on. It was hot in the canyon, brutally so. He could feel the liquid boiling from his flesh. A rock beneath his tongue for moisture; it helped hardly at all. He knew the sun of Big Bend. In twenty-four hours it could bake you dry, reduce you to a helpless, weak, dehydrated creature unable to stand, much less fight. That was what Plumb was waiting for. Plumb would take him, then give him water so he would revive enough to feel it, feel it all.

After sundown, though, it would be cooler. But sun-

down was still hours away. By then, he would have to make a choice. Maybe, just maybe, under cover of darkness, he could work free. At least it was a chance. But it would mean leaving Black Bull Man behind to die.

The shadows lengthened. Rocks rattled on the canyon wall above and opposite. Plumb's voice rang out. "Don't worry, Elias. We ain't leavin'. Just movin' in so we can watch you after dark. You know me. I got eyes like a cat. You can try to sneak away, but you won't git far. I'll be somewhere down there, with you covered. But you won't know where."

"You ain't the only one can see in the dark." Whitton was surprised at what a croak his parched voice was.

"But I the only one with a rifle." Plumb chuckled. "That make a difference, don't it?"

Whitton did not answer. Thirst was raging in him, now, but he would not betray it by more speech. He checked the bandage on Black Bull's torso. It was not good, but it was better than he had hoped. The Comanche was still losing blood, but only a faint seepage. Still, without liquid to replace what he had lost, he was doomed, no doubt about it. *I got to leave him,* Elias thought. *It the only chance I got.*

But then it was as if Black Bull had read his mind. "Dark Rider," he whispered. "You've got to get out of here after dark. Don't worry about me."

"No," Elias said automatically.

"Don't be a fool. I got you in this."

"That don't matter. We'll play it out together." Then he understood that he meant it. It was part of the insanity, part of the surety that gripped him that he would not die without killing Plumb.

And now twilight settled, and the coolness was like a blessing. Whitton spat the pebble from beneath his swollen tongue. Through the top of the rock shelter, he could see the sky; but it was cloudless; stars were coming out; there would be a full moon later. What the Texans called a Comanche moon, because the Indians would strike at night when the moon was high and brilliant. . . .

"Whitton," Devlin called. "You still there? Heh-heh."

Elias did not answer.

"We got liquor in false bottoms in them wagons. Lots of booze. And got them wagons cached where nobody'll find 'em but us. There's plenty of snakehead in 'em to buy off half the Comanch' in the tribe. We'll git your Rancho Bravo. We ain't done yet."

Elias put another pebble beneath his tongue. They were directly opposite the rocks on the canyon wall. Probably not more than two hundred yards away, out of Colt range, but in easy rifle range.

"All right, then, goddamn ya. Don't answer." Devlin fell silent. Now the sun was down. It was as dark as it would ever be; this was the interval before the moon came up. Of course, there would be shadows in the canyon right along. . . .

Then, beside him in the cramped space of their hiding place, Black Bull stirred. "Dark Rider," he whispered. "Can you draw their fire?"

"What?"

"Draw their fire." It was a shaky gasp. "Over to the left. I'll go out to the right—"

"You'll—?"

"They know I'm hard hit. They don't think I can move."

"You can't."

"The hell I can't," he said in English. "I've got life left in me. Plenty of it. And nothin' to do with it but kill them bastards."

"Black Bull—"

"God damn you," Black Bull said, "don't argue with me. You know of any better chance? All right, maybe I can't make it. If I don't, you ain't no worse off. But maybe, just maybe . . . They figure there's only one fightin' man left here. Well, maybe I can surprise 'em."

Elias was silent for a moment. Then he said, "All right. Here's your gun. It's fully loaded."

Black Bull hitched himself around, gasping slightly, took it. "I got to go slow. It'll take an awful long time. But I'll try to get around behind 'em."

"*I* could do that, if you—"

"You'll have to stay here and sing out, keep 'em off their guard. Now, damn it . . ." Black Bull was sitting up, his breath a steady wheeze. "Now. Start some trouble on the other side." His hand was steady on the Colt's grip. He gathered his legs beneath him.

Whitton squeezed his arm. "All right. Good hunting. And . . . Black Bull—"

"Yeah."

"Plumb's mine. Remember that."

"He's yours," Black Bull said. "Now."

Elias groped, found a handful of gravel, and threw it hard from behind the boulder. It clattered loudly up the canyon to the left; and immediately it drew fire, guns flashing on the heights above, lead singing off of stone. He tossed some more, fired around the edge of the boulder, blindly. "Damn you, Plumb!" he squalled. "You remember Willow Woman?"

His answer was a fusillade, directed at his own gun flash. He pulled back, waited until it died. When he looked around, Black Bull was gone. Elias threw more rock, fired three rounds, shouted curses, insults, the vilest names at his command.

Plumb's laugh rang mockingly, triumphant, above the gunfire. "Dry gittin' to you, huh, 'Lias? Well, you jest wait. I'll be comin' for you directly."

"Come and be damned!"

"Not before you too weak to even lift a gun, much less shoot it! Then we'll see what we'll see!"

Whitton fired two more rounds, pulled back behind the boulder. He was panting as he reloaded, not with exertion, but with rage. He looked down the canyon, in the direction Black Bull had gone, but there was nothing to be seen. The Comanche had vanished, totally, and if he even still lived, there was no sound to betray that fact.

Elias shook his head. Black Bull would never make it, of course. Most likely, he would bleed to death before he'd gone a hundred yards. Still, it was as good a way to die as any. The way to die, for a warrior, was attacking.

Writing Black Bull off, he considered his own chances. They were almost nil; there was only one, and he would

have to take it before thirst robbed him of the last of his strength and judgment. About six hours more to hunker here; then, two hours before dawn, he'd make his break, slowly, quietly. By then, maybe Plumb or Devlin would be asleep; with luck, it would be Devlin awake, whose sight, especially at night, was nowhere as good as Plumb's. Anyhow, it was the only possibility, not worth much, but all he had.

He settled back, rubbing grains of tobacco in his heavy-lidded eyes to fend off sleep, sucking on a pebble. Somewhere in the distance, coyotes yapped; lobos raised mournful howls. He waited with a patience learned from work with horses and living with Comanches. An hour passed. Two. A third one. Then he tensed. Something or somebody was moving in the canyon. He heard gravel under foot, and he raised his gun. *Plumb?*

Then he caught a rank smell, relaxed, even as he heard the shorting and the churring grunts. Javelinas, the little wild pigs of the desert. They trotted past, snorting and veering away from his hiding place as they caught his scent. Plumb and Devlin heard them, opened fire. One, hit, squealed as it dragged itself away, and Plumb cursed. "Hell, nothin' but some brush pigs. Elias, you still there?"

He didn't answer. "Don't worry!" Plumb yelled. "I know you ain't gone! I been watchin' and I'll keep on watchin'! You won't git past these eyes of mine—and we got moonlight, too!"

That was true; the moon was high enough to send slivers of pale light into the canyon. Still, maybe there would be shadow enough when the time came. If not, he would, anyhow, go out fighting, like Black Bull. . . .

Black Bull. Another hour had passed. And no doubt about it, now. Bull was out there on the canyon floor or somewhere up its wall, dead from loss of blood. *I should never have let him go,* Elias thought. *I could have used his gun.* . . .

As time crawled by, he found it hard to swallow. His tongue was swollen, his body trembling with thirst, fatigue, weakness. He could not afford to postpone his break any longer; if he did, he would be too weak to make

it. Already he was having weird hallucinations and visions; once he thought Willow Woman was there behind the rock with him. Another time, he was chasing buffalo. . . .

All right, Elias thought. Taking his knife, he pricked himself sharply with its blade, and the pain cleared his head. He sheathed it and checked his gun; it was fully loaded and every cap secure on its nipple. A bar of shadow lay over his side of the canyon, but it would soon shift. He flexed his legs, ridding them of cramps, sucked in a breath, edged toward the end of the rock shelter on his hands and knees, weary body tensing, ready to make its run.

It came, then, the scream of a totured soul in Hell, shattering the night with its ferocity, the high-pitched ululating war cry of a Comanche. It rose from the heights across the canyon, behind the hiding place of Plumb and Devlin, and Elias froze for a moment in incredulity. *Black Bull Man!* he thought. *He made it!* Then he knew he had his chance, and he shot out from behind the rock like a jackrabbit, even as the scream sounded again.

"Son of a bitch!" Devlin squawked. There was gunfire above, but not aimed at Elias. His legs drove, pumped, as he scuttled through the shadow, almost fell over the buckskin's carcass. He clawed, found the canteen, ripped it loose, ran on. There was a lot of shooting on the heights, now, and that war cry came over and over, as if a dozen men were up there.

Elias brought up hard against a shoulder of rock, shielded, he knew, from fire from above. Panting, he leaned against it, clawed at the canteen plug, ripped it out, took three quick swallows. He wanted to drain it, dared not, threw it away. But what water he had taken coursed through him like wine, and now he had strength enough, and, running on, across the canyon and around its shoulder, sought a place to climb.

He found one, in the moonlight, with gun in hand, went up it like a goat, making for the place on the canyon wall where Plumb and Devlin had been. He scrabbled over a shelf, saw in the distance the spurt of gunfire, yellow flashes. Guiding on that, he gained height, worked through

jumbled rock. Black Bull had made it somehow, was up there behind, above Plumb and Devlin, but had only the six loads for his gun. Some must be gone already, and, Elias thought, now it is my turn to pull them off of him. He steadied himself against a boulder. "Plumb!" he bellowed, and his voice rang off the canyon walls. "Goddamn you, Plumb! I'm up here, now, and I'm armed and ready! You got the guts to come at me?"

Guts . . . me . . . The echo faded. The shooting stopped.

"Plumb! You better come for me! I'm comin' for you—"

Comin' . . . you . . . Then Plumb's voice, rich, deep, unafraid. "You're damn' right I'm comin'!"

Elias laughed without sound. "Then come ahead! I'm here!" Jubilant, he worked on through the boulders and the shale, climbing, edging along the canyon wall. Pools of silver, blots of shadow, uncertain footing. "Plumb? I'm waitin'!"

"Don't worry! I'm on my way!"

Devlin's voice was a raspy squawk. "Plumb, dammit, don't leave me! That Injun's out there."

"Old man, if you can't handle one shot Comanche . . . It's 'Lias that I want! See to yourself!" Then Plumb's voice faded.

Elias edged forward, careful with every step, now, keeping to cover, to darkness. Two hundred yards, maybe; that was how much separated Plumb and himself, and Plumb had a rifle. It would be a stalk, all right, a hell of a stalk. It would call for every bit of Indian training that he had.

He did not hurry, and he stopped every five or ten feet to look, turning his head, keeping his eyes still, in the Indian way, searching for any flicker of motion.

From far away, it seemed, the voice of Black Bull Man was raised. "Hezekiah Devlin!" The words quavered, almost ghostly, eerie, in their weakness. "It won't do you no good to run."

"Goddamn you, Black Bull!" Devlin cried out. "Plumb!"

But Plumb did not answer. He was out there, Elias

knew. Somewhere in the rocks on the canyon wall, stalking Whitton as Whitton stalked him. Elias eased forward, his motions almost liquid; he seemed to flow through the shadows. He was Comanche, now, all of him, brain and body, and . . . ten yards more, twenty, thirty. He stopped to listen. Nothing. He went on. Ten yards more. He halted again to listen.

Then he heard it, coming from the darkness ahead, and there was no way Plumb could stop it. In the profound silence of the canyon, it was clearly audible, the wheezing of breath through the nose Elias had smashed. All at once it stopped, as if Plumb had heard it, too, and had quit breathing. Elias waited patiently. A minute, maybe more, and it began again.

Plumb was somewhere to his right and only yards away.

Elias felt for his next foothold, the one after that, changing direction. Ten feet, twenty, keeping to the shadow. But now, a patch of moonlight, and, beyond it, darkness; and he listened, holding his own breath, and he knew. Plumb was in that darkness. And in pistol range, now. Elias eased back the hammer of the Colt, slowly, gently. Still it clicked, coming to full cock.

Across ten yards of moonlight, he heard indrawn breath from the darkness.

Elias grinned. *Right enough,* he said silently to himself, and then he stepped into the moonlight. "Plumb!" he yelled and threw himself hard sideways as the word burst from him; and as the gun flash tongued brightly from the darkness, he hit the ground on his left shoulder and fired three shots, one straight at the flash, the second just to the left and third to the right of it, in a spread. Then he was rolling, coming up in shadow, gun raised; but there was no need to use it. Plumb came erect, a pillar of blackness in the night, and stepped with a strange, loose-kneed gait into the moonlight. The Colt in his hand was pointed downward. His head twisted strangely as he looked around. He tried to lift the gun, but it seemed to weigh too much. Then Plumb pitched forward on his face, was still.

Elias stood there in the shadow, panting, drained; but

only for a second. There was still Devlin somewhere ahead. . . .

At that instant, a gun roared, yards away; and a man cried out. Then, from the night, came that high-pitched war cry once again, trailing off in weakness. Elias crouched, ran forward, dodging and weaving through the rocks and shadows. All at once he halted, peering into a moonlit hollow behind a clump of boulders, not twenty feet away.

Devlin lay there, making whimpering sounds, rolling, holding with both hands his skinny hip. Blood poured between his fingers.

Whitton moved quickly, gun up, ran into the hollow, and Devlin, crazy with the agony of a smashed hip, seemed not to notice him. Elias scooped up guns, shoved them out of reach, whisked the knife from Devlin's sheath, rammed it in his belt. "Black Bull!" he called softly.

"I'm here." The voice was a whisper, hardly audible. But then Black Bull rose from among the rocks, came forward unsteadily, one hand clamped to his side, the other holding his Colt. He swayed, lurched; Elias caught him. Somehow Black Bull found the strength to pull free. Slowly, each step an effort, he crossed the little hollow to stand over Devlin.

Devlin's moaning ceased. He raised his head, stared at the Indian above him with pale blue eyes that were no longer opaque, but full of horror. "Black Bull," he whispered. "I didn't— I'll do anything— Please . . ."

Black Bull turned away. Then he sat down, hard, leaned against a rock. As Elias started toward him, he shook his head. "No," he whispered. "I'm all right. See to him first. I don't want him to die. I told you. He belongs to me."

Chapter Fourteen

THE CHAMPAGNE CORK popped with a gunshot sound. Liquid foamed, overflowing, as Philip Killraine refilled Elias Whitton's glass. "Drink up, Elias! Drink up!" Short, stocky, full of energy, cavalry mustache bristling, he slapped Whitton on the shoulder. "All's well that ends well! And, by the Old Harry, what a job you and Loosh have done while you were gone!" He turned to Smoke Rising. "And ask your lady if she would like another glass."

Before Elias could speak, Smoke Rising, understanding, shook her head. She had stayed close to him all night, somewhat at a loss amid all the exuberant confusion of the celebration; yet, she bore herself with such instinctive dignity, was so imposingly handsome in her best beaded buckskin dress, that, Whitton thought proudly, she was at no disadvantage at all compared to the other women: Irene Gannon, Evelyn Calhoon, and the wife Philip Killraine had brought home from Colorado, Jenny.

Elias drank; he had never tasted champagne until tonight, and he liked it. It filled him with warmth as he looked around the big room of the fort, already transformed with the furniture brought in the wagons from Colorado. Then Henry Gannon touched his arm.

The boss cattleman of Rancho Bravo looked drawn and older, and he still walked with two canes, although, already, he could sit a horse again. The bullets he had taken in the Lawrence gang's raid on the wagon train had slowed him down, but they had not stopped him, and

eventually, the doctor at Fort Sumner had said, he would be good as new. In his homely, freckled face, his blue eyes gleamed. "Elias," he said quietly. "It's been a long time, eh?"

Whitton knew what he meant. A long time since he and Gannon had sat across a campfire in the Nueces brush and he had told Henry about the grassland empire beyond the Pecos. "But, by God," Henry whispered, "we pulled it off!"

"That we did," Elias said. He watched Calhoon go around the room, refilling glasses. The place was packed with Rancho Bravo men: those bearded, ragged Texans who had fought so long and endured so much and now savored their reward—the big payoff, the whopping bonus.

When every glass was brimming, Calhoon stood in the center of the room. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted, quenching the noise.

They all gave him their attention.

Calhoon stood spraddle-legged, glass in hand. "I want to propose a toast," he said. His voice was serious. "Less than a year ago," he went on, "two men had a dream. It seemed impossible, but somehow it came true. Four thousand head across the Pecos . . . a ranch in the heart of Comanche country . . . a fortune in Colorado gold. . . . Nobody believed that we could do it. But, by the grace of God, we *have* done it!"

His eyes swept the room. "Not without cost. Good men lie buried who gave everything they had for that dream. And every man in this room has carried his own burden, fought his own battle. And there'll be more burdens and more battles in the future. But this ranch has its roots down, now, and so deeply, solidly, no one will ever pull them up. We are here to stay."

He raised his glass. "So, ladies and gentlemen," he said, very quietly, *"I give you Rancho Bravo!"*

Well past midnight, the celebration was still going on. But Elias and Smoke Rising had slipped away early to the lodge beneath the cottonwoods down the creek. "I

must hurry to learn American," she said, later on, as she lay in the crook of his arm beneath the robe. "I like them —the other women. I want them to like me."

"They already do," Elias said.

Drowsily, she said, "But we must go for the fall hunt, and the spring one. We are still Comanches."

"Of course." But then she was asleep.

He lay there for a long time, but sleep did not come to him. Presently he arose, dressed, slipped from the lodge. Lights still glowed in the fort, and there was the squeaky sound of a fiddle someone had brought all the way from the Nueces. Whitton called up a horse from his string at the corral, bridled it, and mounted, bareback. He rode out of the canyon, out onto the vast open beyond, reined in on a rise of ground. Dismounting, he sat beside the horse, under a sky as immense and unknowable as the things that moved within him. Out here, alone, he had time now to think about the last few days.

The deep Big Bend . . . Once again he was there in the dawn on the flank of Rosillo Peak. He had bandaged Devlin's wound as best he could, then turned to Black Bull Man.

The Indian's skin was a strange, pale greasy color, but his eyes were vital, full of life. His flank was a crusted scab of dried blood. "I don't understand how you did it," Elias said, working on the wound. Shattered ribs, all right. "You crawled down the canyon, up the hill, gave me my chance, took Devlin— By rights you ought to be dead."

"I did what I had to do," Black Bull said. "It took a long time, yes. I had to stop and rest a lot. Times I thought, maybe, I couldn't go on. But then I remembered Sun Woman. . . ." He took another drink from Devlin's canteen. "Elias," he said. "Devlin. I want you to strip him and stake him out. Save me that much trouble."

Whitton's spine chilled. "Black Bull—"

Black Bull's face was wholly savage. "Do what I say." His gaze, hard as obsidian, met Whitton's. "It's that, or you had better kill me. Because, I swear to you, if you try to stop me from what I am going to do, I'll make war

against you and Rancho Bravo as long as there's life in me."

Elias looked at him a moment. There was no help for it. At last, he said, "All right."

"No," Devlin whispered. Then he began to yell. *"No, no, no . . ."*

Elias said, presently, "It's done."

"I want my knife, some dry wood, some matches."

After he had got everything together, Whitton said, "I'm going to camp down the canyon."

"Do that," Black Bull said. "Give me a day. A whole day."

"You have it," Whitton answered harshly.

He had thought he was camped far enough away not to hear Devlin's screaming. He was wrong.

Elias filled his pipe, lit it, looking up into the vastness of the high plains night, putting that memory from his mind. There were better ones, much better. . . .

Like the triumphant, jubilant reception from his partners when, with Black Bull on a travois, he had returned to Rancho Bravo to find the Colorado wagons there. Like the pleasure of the Comanches when they received the trade goods—not only what had been promised, but more, in abundance, as compensation for the lateness. And Black Bull had extracted the location of Devlin's cached wagons; one of his closest friends carried that information to Noconah in confidence. After the whiskey in the false bottoms had been poured out, those goods would be added to the others, insuring the People a winter of ease and plenty for the first time in years. And, another good memory, the pitching of Smoke Rising's lodge beneath the cottonwoods as the rest of the Indians moved out with the goods, to be delivered to the tribe.

Black Bull, still on a travois, looking weak and ghastly, traveled with them. Maybe, Whitton had thought, looking down at him, he would live and maybe not. If he died, it would not be from the wound, but from grief.

The Indian's shrunken face was grave as, lying on the robes between the poles, he stared up at Whitton.

"Black Bull—" Whitton began.

"It's wrong," Black Bull whispered. "It's all wrong. For the People."

"What?"

"Rancho Bravo. I believed . . . for a little while. You and Calhoon made me believe. But I don't, anymore." He paused, gathering strength. "It's like poison, in a spring. This Rancho Bravo. For the Comanches, anyhow. For me. *She* would still be alive, if you hadn't come."

There was no way to refute that.

"It's not your fault," Black Bull went on. "It's not mine. There is the People's way, and there is the white man's way, and they'll never run together, never mix." He closed his eyes. "While you were bringing me here, and I was sick, I dreamed. My soul went out of my body and it flew around. I went to a dark place where there were nothing but the bones of buffalo and hungry little children eating dirt." He paused, seeking breath. "Maybe not soon, Dark Rider. But the time will come when we'll have to fight you, for our children's sake."

"I hope never," Elias said.

"I hope so, too. But no man argues with a dream." Then, slowly, he put out a hand. "We'll talk about it in the spring," he said. "We'll hunt together then and talk about it."

"Yes," Elias said, shaking hands with him. Then the caravan moved out. He had stood there for a long time, watching them dwindle and finally disappear, until all he could see was a swirl of dust.

Elias got to his feet. The wind was freshening; the sky was canopied with stars, cold and glittering. *No man can argue with a dream. . . .*

And he was caught between two dreams. Black and yet Indian, he would never be wholly part of Rancho Bravo. And yet, listening to Devlin scream, he had realized something else. There was a part of him that would never be wholly Comanche either. He was suspended between worlds; it was hard to think, to decide what he was, and what was right and what was wrong.

He went to the horse, stood there a moment before he

mounted. Whatever he was, he told himself, he was a man. And a man did the best he could, all the time; and that had to be enough.

For now, it was. Whitton mounted, from the right side, and rode back through the enormous night to where his woman waited in his lodge, not slowing as he passed the lighted windows of the fort of Rancho Bravo.

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Part Commanche himself, Elias had pledged guns and supplies to the Indians to help them through the winter. But the Rancho Bravo wagon train loaded with the promised goods was a thousand miles away, perhaps lost or destroyed by looters.

When Elias suggested they give the Commanches *their* guns the others said it was madness, that the Indians would kill them all; but Whitton swore it was their only chance – little knowing that two vicious killers in the territory, Plumb and Devlin, had the power to dash their last remaining shred of hope. . . .

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